THE REDLAKES

Francis Brett Young

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THE
REDLAKES

BOOKS BY

FRANCIS BRETT YOUNG

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My Brother Jonathan
Portrait of Clare
Sea Horses
Cold Harbour
Woodsmoke
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The Red Knight
The Black Diamond
The Tragic Bride
The Young Physician
The Iron Age
The Dark Tower
Deep Sea
Undergrowth (with Eric Brett Young)
The Key of Life
The Crescent Moon
Five Degrees South
Poems 1916–1918
Marching on Tanga
Robert Bridges
The Furnace (with William Armstrong)
Love Is Enough

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BOOK ONE

THE OLD FOLKS

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I. *The Dove's Nest*

IN THE year of our Lord nineteen-hundred when this adventure began, his first of any consequence since that of being born, Jim Redlake's parents were living in a house inappropriately called The Dove's Nest, a solitary Georgian dwelling embowered by sooty beeches on the crown of the Sedgebury ridge, the Western rim of the basin which contains the Black Country coal-measures. That prettily romantic name, with its hint of connubial felicity, should have given Jim's father, George Redlake, food for his ironical imagination, since, even for a novelist, his married life with Jim's mother, with whom he had eloped as a girl of seventeen twelve years before, had long passed the idyllic stage. He was one of those writers to whom success comes too early in life. By the time he was twenty-five he had found himself adopted by a small and, as he thought, esoteric group of grim intellectuals whose flatteries turned his head. By the time he was thirty-five his name was respectfully mentioned as that of a prophet of causes that were not only lost but forgotten; the kind of writer who is annually rediscovered and dropped. As time went on the rediscoveries became less frequent and the drops more complete. He couldn't understand it; which was natural enough, for he knew that he had a style of his own, considerable erudition, and a philosophy of life which was vigorous if increasingly bitter. What he didn't realise was that then (as now, for that matter) the people who care for style, erudition or philosophy wouldn't feed a canary, much less a man, his wife and a growing boy; but the fact remained that the more he craved for the amenities of bourgeois comfort the poorer he grew, with the result that he abandoned his proper vocation, which was the writing of elegant, caustic little essays flavoured with brimstone, for the treacly kind of novel which he thought the public wanted. Now treacle is all very well by itself, and so is brimstone, but the combination of both with which George Redlake sought a renewal of his reputation had a strongly medicinal flavour which the devotees of treacle and brimstone neat resented equally. He lost his old, exiguous public and found no new one. He became, in short, a poor and bitterly querulous man, inveighing against the swine before whom he cast his pearls of Beauty so lavishly under the hallucination that people care more for Beauty (whatever that may be) than for style, erudition or an ironic philosophy. Though he was quite sure that something was wrong with the world which neglected his books—and his books, as a matter of fact, were much better than most—his pride could not ever admit that anything was wrong with himself. Cloud-wrapt in the exaltations of a proud persecution-mania, he decided that the trouble most probably lay in his environment, so that his wife and child were snatched from place to place over the length and breadth of England, from the Lakes to the Sussex downs, from the Lincolnshire wolds to the Marches of Wales—without any result but the crushing expense of removals and the fact that by the time they came to rest on the Sedgebury Ridge he was actually too poor to think of moving again.

This final translation was a signal piece of good luck, and due to the fact that the agent of the local landowner, Lord Clun, had been up at Oxford with George and was sufficiently behind the times still to regard him as a minor prophet. George Redlake clung to this last living admirer as to a floating spar, and when the Dove's Nest was offered him at a nominal rent—which was actually high, for the place was in bad repair, distorted by mining subsidences, and had not been occupied for years—he decided that he had fallen on his feet in his spiritual home. Here, at least, he declared, the mean world would leave him alone; though that didn't prevent him from being affronted when the world did so. The Dove's Nest, without doubt, was lonely and utterly isolated, how spiritually remote nobody who has not lived in the Black Country can possibly imagine. It clung to an exalted ridge whose bases were swathed in a perpetual smoke-screen, and commanded a prospect of a savagery compatible with that of George Redlake's spirit and fitted to the composition of a stark, cindery masterpiece.

He embarked on the new work with a tense and gloomy enthusiasm. But the masterpiece would not come. As a matter of fact, the man should have stuck to his essays; he was too much interested in abstractions, too little in humanity, ever to have made a novelist;

and the only contact with human kind which was open to him, that of his wife and child, he despised as beneath his notice. When once the first physical rapture of his marriage was over, and it passed quickly, it seemed to him that he had been the victim of a bad practical joke on the part of Nature. The very youth and prettiness of his wife became an offence to his eyes, and the existence of the child, now a sturdy little boy of ten, an additional injury. It was the ballast of these millstones, he felt, that hampered his wings, dragging him down from the empyrean that was his element. If once he could shake them off, he would be free, he could write! But he was poor, and even a selfishness as sublime as his could not see them starve; so, alternating between excesses of pitiful sentiment and an icy cruelty that was not unrelated, he turned the Dove's Nest into a spiritual equivalent of the blighted landscape below.

A weaker man might have drunk or drugged, or painted the Black Country red. But George Redlake was not a weak man; in the bitter core of him there was actually a strain of austere puritanism which made the culminating events of the Redlakes' life at the Dove's Nest so curiously interesting. At a time when his creative faculty seemed to be at its lowest, he received an admiring letter from an unknown reader, the latest to discover one of his earlier books, which he regarded as his best. The receipt of this letter sent him soaring sky-high; his pent spirit was released in a score of passionate pages in which he laid bare that part of his soul which he most jealously shielded from his wife. The unknown correspondent replied with sympathy and intelligence. By the time he had filled another twenty pages with heart-sobs George was so much himself again as to be tolerably polite to his wife. The reply to this letter revealed the fact that the unknown was a woman—how different from other women!—a widow, living in North Bromwich, a free spirit, resentful, as George was, of her stultifying environment. Her late husband, a manufacturer, had left her ample means and an admirable cellar, and she had no friend in the world, much less a soul-mate.

That word, it must be confessed, rather stuck in George Redlake's throat; "Affinity" was bad enough, but "soul-mate" . . . Still the fact remained that this one warm gust of admiration had quickened his talent to so sudden a blooming that it would be unfair to deny the world any possible fruit. He stalked into North Bromwich (no money to waste on railway fares) and presented himself at the widow's house. She was older considerably than George Redlake's wife and by no means beautiful; but the house was a palace of luxury compared with the Dove's Nest, the cellar all that was promised, and herself an excellent listener—which was what George wanted, since his wife had heard all that he wanted to say to the point of saturation.

He returned to Sedgebury that day in a state of fiery exaltation, and sat up half the night in his study, ferociously writing. Next day he found it necessary to return to North Bromwich to consult a dentist, and later, when the dentist had served his turn, embarked on a long course of literary research in the Municipal Library which compelled him to spend the greater part of his time in the city. These absences, if the truth were known, relieved Mrs. Redlake. It was no fun for her and positively demoralising for the child to have George mooning about the house like Napoleon on Elba. For the first time in her life at Sedgebury they had a life of their own, and she was so glad to see George Redlake even moderately happy that it never occurred to her to ask the cause of his happiness. It was typical of George Redlake that this anxiety of his wife's to let sleeping dogs lie should have given him cause for a new grievance. It proved, more clearly than ever before, that she wasn't interested in him; so, if only to assert his own importance as a splendid sinner and to show her that even if she had ceased to appreciate him other people did, he made a clean breast of the whole affair to his wife, inviting her to realise that she, by her lack of encouragement, had been the prime cause of this magnificent lapse.

By this time, unfortunately for his sensitive egoism, Mrs. Redlake had become too hardened by his numerous romantic vagaries to care very much one way or the other about this one. The affair didn't strike her in the very least as sublime. It appeared to her as an ordinary, vulgar adventure, in which George was anything but the victim of an heroic tragedy. Even when he explained that in spite of an overwhelming passion both he and Mrs. Mudd (which was Egeria's unromantic name) had preserved their virtue technically intact, she was impressed so little that he began to wish they hadn't. The only comment she made on this noble restraint was to ask him "Why?" If she had given him back protests, recriminations or tears, he might easily have achieved the drama for which he craved in a harrowingly magnificent renunciation crowned by tender reconciliations. She did nothing of the sort. Her half-humorous acceptance of the situation as a matter of mean fact left his full sails flapping. She was far too proud a woman to admit herself wounded. She didn't care whom he made love to or how or when, just so long as his love-making didn't affect their son.

George Redlake, returning rather desperately to his lady with the spice of the affair diminished, and feeling much less heroic than when he had left her, didn't realise this. But the widow in North Bromwich did. She was moved by a passionate jealousy of the cold creature whom George's self-pity had described with such painful eloquence. Though George carefully didn't relate just how his heroics had fallen flat she could see that his wife's attitude had hurt and humiliated him. Although she had learned by this time that he winced when she called herself his "soul's mate," that was what she was. There were ways of revenge that would never have occurred to this simple, ill-used genius. As a counter attack she began to show vivid interest in the boy.

This solicitude flattered George Redlake. Up till that moment he had merely regarded Jim as a part of the ballast with which Fate had burdened his talent, or, at best, a convenient peg on which to hang sad little poems. The child now appeared as a fellow victim of his wife's injustice. There seemed no reason in the world why Mrs. Mudd, with her comfortable income, shouldn't mother both of them. With childlike cunning he spirited Jim into the Alvaston mansion. Mrs. Mudd, a childless woman, and likely, from lost opportunity, to remain so, was ravished.

"But, my dear," she said, "he's an angel—the living image of you. It makes me burn to think that that woman has any part in him."

To her great disappointment Jim didn't take to Mrs. Mudd. Her gushing manner, which his father lapped up as a kitten laps cream, embarrassed him. He didn't like having his cheek tickled when she kissed him, or the smell of face-powder. He didn't like anyone to kiss him except his mother. But he did, undeniably, adore cream buns, which his mother most wisely denied him; the Alvaston garden, with its thickets of rhododendron, was as enthralling as unexplored jungle after the arid slopes of Sedgebury; the whole house had been cunningly ground-baited with expensive toys; even if he shrank from Mrs. Mudd, he loved, at first sight, Mrs. Mudd's parrot, which she vaguely resembled; and his father at Alvaston was much better company than ever he was at home.

When she learned, from her husband's calculated casual remarks, that Jim had been taken to Alvaston and, as a matter of course, was going to be taken there again, Elizabeth Redlake was seized with an apprehension far more chilling than any that George's platonic infidelities had caused her. Even though she told herself that it would be selfish in her to deny Jim the excitement of these visits, she knew that it would only be playing into the other woman's hand if she objected to them. It gave her a thrill of triumph when Jim told her that Mrs. Mudd was rather like the grey parrot, but not nearly so nice, and when they were alone together in the warm, firelit evenings, she with her arms about him, she knew that the tie that bound him to her could not easily be dissolved. Jim meant more to her now than ever before. Since the fiasco of his momentous confessions her poor, wounded husband had scarcely spoken to her except at mealtimes. He slept in his dressing-room, worked in his study, or stalked about the hill-tops obviously bowed beneath the weight of his splendid if unconsummated sin, though his sense of the ridiculous prevented him from ever mentioning Mrs. Mudd by name. From shy peeps into his study she found that his new book, the fruit of this grotesque fecundation, was growing gigantically. As soon as the last page was finished, the inspiration would be no longer needed. It might even be a success—heaven knew they had waited long enough for that—and as soon as the money was forthcoming she was certain that George would be tempted to fly from the Dove's Nest and his mature Egeria together. She had never believed, would never believe, that George Redlake was in love. He had never been in love, she reflected bitterly, with anyone but himself. And what did it matter, after all, if she had her baby?

If Mrs. Redlake didn't over-estimate Mrs. Mudd's attractions, she did underrate her cleverness. It took her completely off her guard when one evening George Redlake, abandoning his Byronic gloom, came out with his monstrous proposal.

"My friend in North Bromwich," he said, "has taken a great fancy to Jim."

That was natural enough, she agreed, for Jim was a darling. Who wouldn't?

"She is extremely wealthy, as you know," George Redlake went on ponderously, "and has no children of her own. So to-day she made a proposal, an extraordinarily generous one." He paused; Mrs. Redlake held her breath; she knew what was coming: this woman was going to leave the child money. Let her keep her money! I would rather starve, she thought, than let him touch a penny of it! But while the thought made the blood fly to her face, George Redlake went on:

"You realise, Elizabeth, that my work's never been appreciated." The old, old, bitter story of non-recognition! She knew it so well that she needn't even listen. "It's a crime," he was saying, "that a son of mine,"—his, indeed! How much had he cared?—"should be denied the chance of using the brains that he's probably inherited. You know perfectly well that, as things are, we can't afford to send him to school." No, he shan't go to school, her heart cried, not yet—he isn't old enough, he's a baby! "So my friend has most generously suggested,"—She shook her head hopelessly. Was the man so obtuse that he couldn't see how the words affronted her?—"suggested," he went on, "that she should bear the expense. I told her that, in a vague way, we'd already thought of Rugby . . ."

"No, no. I won't have it. It's impossible, George." The words rushed through Mrs. Redlake's mind but were never spoken.

"On one condition," said George Redlake.

"Condition?" She spoke at last. "*Condition?* What do you mean?"

"The condition, quite reasonable, I think, that Jim shall be formally adopted by her."

"Adopted? Adopted? George . . . do you realise what you're saying?"

"I might have expected that you'd be selfish, Elizabeth."

"Selfish? Do you call it that? Are you so utterly insensitive? Selfish? Why, Jim's part of me, part of myself. The proposal's an insult! Do you imagine for one moment that I'd give him up to anybody?"

He hadn't imagined anything—that was his trouble as a writer. For ten years he had been married to this palpitant, tender creature without realising her except as a lay-figure, a subsidiary character in the absorbing, introspective romance of his own autobiography. His characters were not in the habit of coming to life like this. It was their business to conform to the rules of their creator's literary practice. If it became necessary he could ride them on the curb and bring them up on their haunches before the stone wall of reality.

"There's no need to be hysterical, Elizabeth," he said with a twisted smile.

"She shan't have him!" The rebellious spirit was breaking. She faced him, that tense passionate little figure, on the verge of tears. She looked curiously young, this woman whom he had forgotten, not the wife whom he took for granted, but a flushed, angry schoolgirl. He remembered her just like that—oh, years ago, one night when they had first quarrelled soon after the romantic elopement. Yes, this was the girl whom he had loved so rapturously and who had escaped him as she lay in his arms, the warm-blooded thing who had turned into a pillar of ice! That glimpse of an old passion whipped his resentment anew. She had cheated him—*him*, George Redlake, her creator, without whom she was nothing. A desire to be cruel, to take his revenge, took hold of him. He knew how to teach her, to hurt that quivering spirit and flesh, even though he could never possess them. A poetic revenge! She should suffer at the hands of the stale hag (poor, poor Mrs. Mudd!) into whose arms her coldness had driven him. Ice for ice! The moment demanded a chilly, judicial composure.

"You appear to be ignorant," he said, with a smile, "of the laws of this country. They may seem to you callous. Unfortunately, there they are! And they give me, Jim's father, the power to do just what I like in this matter. If I decide that he shall be adopted—well, he will be. That's all."

"He's mine! Nobody shall have him! I'd rather die!" was all she could say.

"Die?" he echoed. "My dear child, it's quite unnecessary and rather foolish to say that. Of course there's no hurry. It's far too important a matter to be decided carelessly. I shall think it over, and you'd better do the same."

"Think it over?" Her mind was so empty of everything but fear and indignation that she could only repeat his words.

II. *The Flight*

THE man who sat opposite Jim Redlake and his mother, with his back to the engine, smoothed out his sandwich-papers, folded them, and popped them under the seat with a furtive air. He was a big-boned man whose body, in spite of its ample coverings of flesh, aroused the boy's interested speculations on the magnitude of the skeleton beneath which revealed itself in a series of protuberances: gnarled knee-joints stretching the laces of his riding-breeches; enormous wrists and knuckles fledged with fiery hairs; an Adam's Apple, much bigger than Jim's whole nose, jutting out like the crop of a gorged bird above the blood-stained edge of an india-rubber collar; an undershot jowl outlined by coppery whiskers; a beaked red nose, and topmost, beneath his cragged forehead, two caverns from the depths of which twinkled tiny eyes, like a pig's, of a pale and, as it seemed to Jim, malignant blue.

Twelve hours before his journey began, Jim hadn't the faintest notion that the preoccupations of his quiet childhood were about to be disturbed. He had gone to bed quite unaware of the emotional thunderstorm that was brewing, though, had he been wiser or more sensitive, he might have felt some tinglings of its electrical propinquity in his mother's set lips and the sudden, bewilderingly passionate release of her feelings when she came upstairs to kiss him good-night. At that moment the candlelight had shown him a face that was like a mask, out of which her dear eyes, which were hugely dark, neither hazel nor grey, but with pupils so flashingly black as to give her slight person an almost queenly distinction, surveyed him remotely, as though, for the moment, her interest in him were automatic. Then, suddenly, becoming aware of his bewilderment and being ashamed or sorry for having caused it, she had blown out the candle, and thrown herself down on her knees with her arms about him.

"Do you love me, Jimmy—do you love me better than anyone?" she had whispered passionately. "You must love me, for there's nobody else in the world that does." And she held him so tight and nuzzled him so closely with her soft face that the words were all blurred by her hungry kissing.

"Of course I love you, mother darling," he told her, still puzzled, for, most certainly, heaps of people loved her: his father, George Redlake, to begin with, who frequently kissed her on those days when he came down to breakfast and stuck up his newspaper and asked why the eggs were cold and if it weren't humanly possible for Ellen to make toast not tasting like sawdust. It went without saying that married people loved each other. He knew that from the books that his mother read aloud to him curled up quiet as a mouse on her lap in the winter after tea, when his father was locked in his study, writing his novel and not to be disturbed. Then Ellen loved her, besides the baker's young man. "The mistress—poor sweet little love!" She had said it a hundred times. All this business about not being loved was just nonsense; but, nonsense or sense, Jim's mother passionately persisted: how much did he love her and why? she entreated, as though her life depended on his answering precisely.

"I love you . . . oh, dreadfully, and because you're my darling mother," he said, going through the established ritual.

At this she gave a broken laugh, like a sob, and hugged him closer. "Are you my baby?" she said, "Are you your mother's own baby?"

Of course he was nothing of the sort: he was eleven and a half, which is nearly twelve. Even so, at that moment she seemed so anxious about it, that, out of manly condescension, he let her have her own way, admitting that he was what he perfectly well knew he wasn't. And this diplomatic duplicity of his appeared to content her, for when she had continued to devour him for a little while in the dark with her mumbled endearments, she sighed and released him. When next she spoke, her voice was her own, though a trifle wavering.

"Now kiss me good-night," she ordered. "No, kiss me properly."

And Jim kissed her properly, as she called it, which meant a long, lingering kiss on her yielding mouth. After which, for a moment in the dark, her fingers, soft as her lips, strayed over his hair and his eyes like a dim moth's wings, and he heard again that sound which was between a laugh and a sob. "Sleep well, darling," she said, and was gone, like a ghost through the soft-opening door which closed behind her as though a ghost had closed it.

But Jim hadn't slept well that night. Although she had gone, his mother had left behind her some aura of spiritual uneasiness that had power to trouble him because it was so mysterious. Even when the door had closed, he knew that she hadn't gone down stairs as usual. She was still on the landing—he knew it—alone in the dark, collecting herself, stiffening the spirit which she had allowed for one moment to soften. He was so aware of her nearness that, in the end transgressing all rules and the conviction that he was no longer a baby for all she might say to the contrary, he called out to her. She did not answer. Perhaps, by the time that he had mustered the courage of his cowardice, she had gone. There was no sound on the landing for long after this but the creaking of boards beneath his father's heavy, swift, irritable steps; and at this sound he shrank through the bed for fear he had been heard. When his father's steps sounded like that he was not to be trifled with!

And still Jim couldn't sleep. Down in the spare mowing grass, along the foot of the ridge, a landrail kept up its long, monotonous craking, like the bough of a tree that sways and creaks in the night. *Crake . . . crake*, he sang, and Jim tried to picture him; for George Redlake, who knew all about nature and pressed it out flat between the pages of his books like specimens in a herbarium, had once shown him a corn-crake slinking through the long grass of a Sussex meadow. *Crake . . . crake*, he sang, and Jim wished to goodness he would stop it and let him sleep. But the corn-crake wouldn't. He seemed, in fact, to be jeering at him with his slow, harsh laughter, jeering at the boy who, as his father had hinted that day, on the way back from that place in Alvaston, might soon have to abandon this sweet, this almost lover-like existence, in which there was nobody but himself and his mother, and be sent to school. Would his schooldays, he wondered, be really as ghastly as Tom Brown's? Did gigantic and sinister bullies still roast boys alive? *Crake . . . crake*, laughed the landrail. *Crake . . . crake!* Just you wait and see!

The grandfather clock in the empty hall struck ten. They were coming upstairs. The landing light shone through the bedroom door, and the child choked back his thoughts, which were so noisy within him at that moment that he felt they might be heard and betray him. With the light that stole through the door's chink there entered the room a sense of the taut emotions of those two human beings. It blew into that little room like an icy draught.

Often, when his father was writing and in one of his "moods," Jim had assisted at unseemly scenes in which he had been less conscious of those bitter fulminations than of the shame which his mother felt in his own presence or Ellen's. On such occasions he had merely tried to obliterate himself, shrinking out of present existence into some other plane. He would recite to himself *John Gilpin*, or the *Collect for the First Sunday in Advent*, finding in that absorption an ostrich sense of security as complete as if he had slipped right under the table. But the wordless conflict of two souls and bodies which now possessed the landing outside his bedroom was less easily to be evaded, piercing wood and stone. Their silence burdened his small heart with a cold, a leaden horror. Hoping to heaven that one or the other would speak, he lay rigid, listening intently. Although the noise made him jump, he was almost relieved when the dressing-room door was slammed violently, and, a moment later, the rumour of an endless argument began.

He could hear no words; he had no idea what the pair were talking about, though he conceived a guilty feeling that, somehow, he must be concerned in it. The two voices answered each other with a level, antiphonal regularity; there was nothing in their tones to suggest reproach or anger or pain; yet, for all that, he knew that this contest was as intense as that dark night-long wrestling at Bethel, about which his mother had read to him. Something terrible and momentous was happening in the next room.

At last, as suddenly as they had begun, the two voices died down. There was no sound in the house but the tick of the clock's slow pendulum, the scurry of a wainscot mouse, the creak of stairboards that stretched themselves while they slept. Even the landrail was silent now. Out of very tiredness Jim fell asleep.

And indeed, when he woke next morning, his nocturnal distresses had no more than a dream's validity. They dissolved with the last films of a June mist which presaged, as Ellen announced while she bustled him through the culminating agonies of his toilet, a day that was going to be a "scorcher." There was nothing unusual in the scene downstairs, apart from the fact that his mother appeared at the breakfast table with her bonnet on, and that when he stretched out his hand for a brown boiled egg she quickly restrained him.

"I don't think I'd have one if I were you, darling," she said, "because, you see, it might upset you in the train."

"The train?" He didn't understand.

"Yes. We're going to town."

"Town," at Sedgebury, of course, meant North Bromwich, and the precaution was a just one, as the excitement of his recent visits to Mrs. Mudd's had frequently precipitated an attack of train-sickness; so he contented himself with an ascetic breakfast on Ellen's dry toast which, that morning at least, would have justified the complaints of his father who, rather to Jim's relief, did not appear at the breakfast table.

There was nothing unusual in that. George Redlake's creative temperament demanded a domestic licence. "When I'm writing a book," he would say, "I am no use to God or man." And though his relations with the Almighty were far too mysterious for his son to penetrate, Jim knew that he certainly wasn't much use to him or his mother. He might, however, on an occasion like this—for a surprise visit to North Bromwich *was* an occasion—have condescended to honour them with a benevolent viaticum. Although he was a law unto himself, George Redlake was a great stickler for good manners in other people, and in his own family particularly. Yet when, his conscience pricking, Jim suggested to his mother that they had better report their departure, she cried "No, no, for goodness' sake!" and bustled him along the garden path to the waiting fly with such a pretty, flushed precipitance that before he knew what had happened they were bowling down the lane, with Ellen waving them good-bye from the garden gate. His last glimpse of Ellen showed her lifting her apron to her face.

"I believe she's crying," he told his mother. "Isn't that funny of her?"

"Crying? What nonsense, darling!" she answered. But her own voice trembled.

Indeed, the whole of their progress that day was coloured by her queer flushed excitement. It made her quite childishly gay, with swift alternations of laughter and calm, and awfully pretty. She was wearing one of the new tight-buttoned bodices of the colour of dark wine-stain, with a *ruche* of cream lace at the throat which broke the line between the sombre glowing stuff of her gown and the gleam of her red lips and shining eyes—those dark eyes, brightened by excitement, which flashed on him so lovingly, and yet, somehow, shyly, from behind her black-spotted veil. There were frills of cream-coloured lace at her wrists as well, and from these her hands, the most daintily, firmly shaped hands, escaped like water-lilies from their sheathed sepals, the fine bloom, if you will, of her delicate body and spirit. During all the first part of the journey, through the slagged wilderness which separated their home from North Bromwich, the hand that was nearest as Jim sat cuddled against her clutched his, protectively, perhaps—and yet it almost seemed as if it were seeking rather than giving protection; for sometimes it trembled, as though she shivered with cold, which was impossible, although the "scorcher" prophesied by Ellen had not yet developed, and sometimes it gave a quick, spasmodic contraction, like the twitching muscles of a small, nervous animal. But when Jim looked up, to see what that meant, her quick lips softened, her eyes met his smiling. "What is it?" she asked, as though it were he who had trembled.

All this time, in spite of the reassurance of her company and her pretence of calm, Jim had a feeling that this was no ordinary journey. He smelt something sinister, like a puppy whose mistress is taking it to a new home. He knew that something was being hidden from him, yet guessed that he would only be "put off" with some laughing evasion if he asked what. She was always a terrible tease, and he such a solemn child, and suppose, after all, it was just some delicious surprise—a circus, perhaps or a conjurer—that lay in wait for him! When they reached North Bromwich, however, his doubts were confirmed, for, instead of wandering as usual through the shopping streets, he was swept bewilderingly across the width of the town to the other station and into a red Midland train which differed from the chocolate Great Western one not only in the colour of its upholstery but in its whole character.

The very air that blew through the carriage windows from fields, now flushed with tall sorrel, had a soft yet exhilarating quality, so different from the acrid, hot-smelling atmosphere of Black Country pit mounds as to seem positively abnormal. The train, an express, seemed to benefit by the air's lesser density in a speed that was buoyant, surging, hopeful, compared with the dogged, clanking progress of the squat little local. Even the red-bearded giant, in the opposite corner, who had just finished his lunch, belonged to an exotic breed of humanity, appropriate to the green land through which, between dipping telegraph wires, they were being whirled. That monster, having poked his sandwich papers under the seat, picked up a crumb from the *Stockbreeders' Gazette*, which he had been using as a tablecloth, swallowed it, and then fumbled automatically in the skirts of his cord coat and produced a short clay-pipe, which he proceeded to fill from a tin box stuffed with shag.

Jim held his breath. Though he had watched the slow mastication of those sandwiches with envy, for, after his inadequate breakfast, he was growing hungry, he hoped to goodness that their companion would realise that this wasn't a smoking compartment, before it was too late. One whiff of that black tobacco on the top of the railway's characteristic odour of milk-cans, straw and grease, and the whole of their journey, which, so far, had been a success, would be ruined by an attack of train-sickness as humiliating as it was unpleasant. The man with the red beard stuck his pipe in his mouth with a meditative air and, with match suspended, addressed Mrs. Redlake with a confidential wink.

"No objection, I suppose, Ma'am?"

"Well, you see . . ." Jim's mother began. "As a matter of fact . . ."

"Not at all, not at all. Don't mention it." And he shoved his pipe back into his pocket. "Youngster going to school, I suppose?"

"Oh no. Just on a visit," Jim's mother replied, to his great relief; then added: "to Melton Mowbray."

"Melton Mowbray? Pork-pies. Stilton cheeses," said the red man rapidly. "Well, you might go much further and fare worse. Not what they were though. Change at Market Harborough. Friends, I presume?"

Jim couldn't quite see what he meant; but his mother did. They continued to speak as though he were the only person concerned.

"No—relations," she said. "He's going to stay with his grandfather at a place called Thorpe Folville."

This was all news to Jim, and awfully exciting. It was typical of his mother's teasing, mysterious ways that she should have kept this enormous secret from him. But if, as she said, they were going to stay at Thorpe Folville—that place whose name he had often already romanticised with cognate visions of Ivanhoe and the tourney at Ashby—why, in heaven's name, were they travelling without any luggage?

"Thorpe Folville. To think of that now!" the red man was saying. "No connection of his Lordship, I presume?"

Of course Jim felt that he shouldn't have presumed anything of the sort; but his mother, who saw the humour of the presumption, gave a gay little laugh—an adorable laugh, of the kind that made Jim love her to distraction.

"No, no," she said, "not in the very least. His grandfather's name is Weston . . . Dr. Weston."

"Then all I can say," the red man replied emphatically, "is that he's a damn lucky lad, if you'll pass the word. He's a champion sportsman if ever there was one, is Dr. Weston. Two daughters, madam, I think?"

"No . . . three. I was married very young," and they went on talking of names and places that meant nothing to Jim, except one, here and there, which recalled the private mythology of his mother's childhood, until the drone of their voices became merged in the rhythm of wheels, and the images which these stray words recalled were no more than those glimpses of farms and ponds and brooks and village steeples that danced out of the unfolding greenness on to his retina and were gone before he had time to think of them, contributing an undercurrent of sound and sight to the main flood of his consciousness which was eagerly concerned with his mother's startling news of their destination.

In the sweetest moments of their intimacy, by slow firelight, Jim's mother had often talked of Thorpe Folville. It was only on those occasions that she ever spoke of it. He had never known her mention the place or its people in his father's presence. They were so much a part of a delightful secret life, that Jim acquiesced in this convention without understanding it, being content to regard Thorpe Folville as a sort of lost paradise, a cloud-country, far removed from their sooty ways, and imagining that she loved it and its people with regretful affection which was perhaps not returned, but that his father loathed everything about it to the point of detestation. When George Redlake took a dislike to anything or anybody—a book, a journal, a person, or a point of view—no one dared to mention it, much less to question his reasons for doing so. If one did, his pale ascetic face became whiter than ever; he would toss his black hair and go swinging about the room with long tigerish strides, as though its narrow dimensions cramped him; then up went his hands to rumple his mop till the whole of it was raised into a threatening comb, erect and combative above a pair of dark eyes that literally blazed.

Yet these swift ebullitions were nothing compared with the reaction that followed them. A scene of this kind would spoil his work for days; and when he wanted to work and couldn't—or thought that he couldn't—the earth and the sky took on a thundery gloom. He would wander from room to room, then out into the garden or over the neighbouring slag heaps like a lost, unhappy child, so peevish that the least show of sympathy would unloose a spate of bitter recriminations against the place, poor Ellen, the district, his wife and Providence. When George Redlake was in one of his "moods" Jim had learnt, by experience, to leave ill alone till a new swing of the pendulum swept them all sky-high into an air of extravagant exaltation which was nearly as uncomfortable as the preceding depression.

Perhaps, Jim reflected, this was why his mother had kept their departure for Thorpe Folville a secret from him, fearing that in his innocence he might blab. But surely it was an exaggeration of prudence that had sent them scurrying over half the breadth of England without any luggage? Not even a night-dress! The whole expedition savoured of flight. A flight from what and from whom? It was all so puzzling that long before he had approached a solution of the mystery Jim had fallen asleep.

When he awoke, the red-haired man had gone. He was tumbled out on the platform at Market Harborough amid a thunder of rolling milk-cans, and hurried, still half asleep, into another train that carried them through a new country of endless pastureland which rolled away to low crests crowned with coppice or infrequent windmills whose great sails turned slowly in a breeze that seemed somehow thinner and dryer than the air that they were wont to breathe.

"Look at the black cattle," his mother was saying to him. "You could almost be certain, even if you didn't know it, that you were in Leicestershire." For the moment Jim was too tired and yawny with hunger to care very much where they were. He huddled up

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against her, dreamily conscious of their progress, feeling that now they had gone so far it might as well last for ever. Even so, he couldn't help being aware of his mother's increasing excitement. It communicated itself, like the flow of an electric current, through the contact of her frail body with his. Though she sat there quite still, her very stillness was vivid. The hand that clutched his tightened on it with eager contractions; he could even hear the quickened beat of her heart through the plum-coloured bodice and see the glint of the locket that rose and fell so rapidly on her breast. Of course he could share none of the emotions that came to her with the wonder of each familiar scene rediscovered; he knew nothing of the deeper emotion that made her warm body tremble until, as the train slowed down for the points at Melton, she roused him, with a brisk, unnatural cheerfulness, and he saw, beneath the spotted veil, that her eyes were bright and her cheeks wet with tears. Even then he didn't understand.

"Why, mother," he asked, with callous astonishment, "whatever's the matter? You've been crying!"

"Crying? What nonsense!" she said, with a sad little laugh. Then, not trusting herself to speak any more, she flung her arms round him and kissed him hungrily, so that, through the rough veil, he felt the cold tears on his own sleep-flushed cheek.

III. *Thorpe Folville*

ON A platform made even more noisy by milk-cans than that of Market Harborough, a vigorous little man with a bushy white beard and whiskers, in an iron-grey riding-kit and a square-topped felt hat—the last person in the world he would ever have imagined to be his grandfather—came bustling towards them and kissed first his mother, then him, with a bristly face that smelt, ever so faintly, of carbolic acid; then they hurried together to the station entrance and mounted a dog-cart, with bright yellow wheels, so high that when he clung to the swaying back-seat Jim felt himself almost as elevated and insecure as on the lunging howdah of the elephant at the Zoo.

One flick of the lash and the goose-rumped roan flew off like an arrow; Dr. Weston sitting up straight and square on the high box with his whip crossed before him in a perfection of style of which he was reasonably proud. As they skimmed through the street of Melton, as deftly as though the dog-cart were as easily steered as a bicycle, his grandfather's whip-elbow was raised in answer to innumerable salutations. It was clear that this potent little figure, on the high box-seat, was regarded as a personality if not as a personage. So intent was he on his speed and his style that the wide road reeled out behind and the church tower of Melton had dipped down out of sight over the crest of a rise before a single syllable, except his first words of greeting, had passed Dr. Weston's lips; and when he did speak, the wind of their progress rushed past so wildly and his gaze was set so steadily forward that what he said, besides being cryptic, was almost inaudible.

"Well, Elizabeth, this is very sudden, isn't it?" he was saying.

"Yes, father," Mrs. Redlake answered through closed lips, as though she were anxious that Jim should not hear. "I only made up my mind last night. It was quite inevitable. I felt that I simply couldn't stand it any longer."

"Money?"

"Oh, of course, there's always *that*. I'm afraid I'm used to it. No, I think I could almost have put up with that indefinitely. It was . . . the other thing."

He grunted. "H'm. . . . Well, I'm not going to say 'I told you so.'" He paused, then laughed grimly. "But your mother will."

"I'm prepared for that." She, too, gave a sad little laugh. The old man touched up the roan, who had taken advantage of this conversation to dawdle, and they shot forward with an impulse that nearly shot Jim off backwards.

"Is it the same mature lady or another?" his grandfather asked.

"The same. He's remarkably faithful . . . in a way," she answered bitterly.

"You mean this to be final? You don't think there's any chance . . ."

"Oh, none whatever," she broke in. "It's hopeless, impossible. You see. . . . No, I'll tell you later."

"And you're still fond of him?"

"Yes . . . in a way. No, that isn't true. I *am* . . . dreadfully, dreadfully!" Her voice wavered: "That's why it's so hard." She turned briskly toward Jim with a brilliant smile: "Are you all right, darling? You're so quiet, behind there, that if you fell off we shouldn't know. The poor child must be tired to death," she went on, using him as a pretext for postponing the inquisition which she knew awaited her. But Dr. Weston could only ride straight over this as over any other line of country. That tender divergence of hers passed quite unnoticed.

"I think you'd better tell me your plans," he said. "Your mother is upset about this. You know what she is; she gets rattled easily."

"My plans?" she repeated. "I've made none. I just acted on an impulse."

"You see, Margaret is coming back from Florence to-morrow. That's what worries your mother."

"Well, in that case—if she's worried I mean"—Mrs. Redlake answered proudly, "we must go somewhere else. That's all."

"No, no, child. That's quite ridiculous. Where else could you go?"

"I don't know. I suppose I shall have to go somewhere, sometime, sooner or later, shan't I?"

"Well, we'll talk about that to-night. You can leave it to me."

The roan swerved at a flutter of paper. "You silly brute! Keep steady! What's wrong with you now?" And the mare tossed her head as though the words were a whip-lash. "Sorry. What were you saying?"

"Nothing, father. I thought . . . I imagined that if I had to go somewhere I might leave him with you."

"Well, we'll see about that. I supposed that you'd sent him to school." The last word was enough to make Jim realise that they were talking about him, and his mother, with the instinct for protecting him which their life with George Redlake had made sensitive, touched his grandfather's sleeve to warn him of certain sharp ears. He tumbled to it quickly. "Ah, yes," he said with a laugh, brusque but not unkindly, and the rest of their talk went on in such low voices that Jim, though he listened intently, could hear no more than a stray word.

It must have been late in the summer afternoon when they reached Thorpe Folville, swinging round the corner between the walls of the castle garden and a church with shallow steps leading up to it under a squat spire, into a long village street, composed of stone houses so low-roofed that they gave it an air of unusual width and cleanliness.

Perhaps it was the contrast of its emptiness and of the houses' warm stone with the grimed brick and crowded pavements of Sedgebury that made the child take this village instantly to his heart. He turned his head eagerly forward to see its whole length bathed in a flood of westering sunshine. As they turned that corner the roan with the stable smell in her nostrils pricked up her ears and quickened her trot. In the middle of the street she took a sudden swerve to the right and swept in through a *porte cochère* to a cobbled courtyard which a red-faced young man, in shirt-sleeves, was sweeping with a besom. As the trap came to a standstill the roan snorted, flecking her neck with foam, and the groom jumped forward, touching his cap, to take the reins which the doctor flung him as he dropped down from the box.

"No message, Ernest?" he asked cheerily.

"No message, sir."

"Well, thank God for that. Come along, Elizabeth, you'll want your tea." He put his arm over the boy's shoulder and pulled him close. "Come along, young man," he said, which, apart from that first bristly kiss, was the first sign he had given of acknowledging Jim's existence. "Now I wonder what your Gran has for tea?" he asked, and his blue eyes twinkled so gaily under the white eyebrows and the square felt hat that Jim instantly forgot the brusqueness and unconcern which he had shown on the drive home, and thought that Thorpe Folville and The Grange (as the house was called) were the most exciting places he had ever seen.

As a matter of fact, exciting or no, The Grange, as a house, was hideous to a degree. It had been built in the first flush of Dr. Weston's prosperity, and in the worst of taste, of the local stone. The doctor, whose excess of energy made him blind to his æsthetic limitations, had been his own architect, with the result that the whole interior was deficient in light and resembled that of a village police-station or town-hall. Its smell was one of varnished pitch-pine permeated by a cross-current of spirituous medicaments that stole in, whichever way the wind was blowing, from the adjacent surgery. To Jim this composite odour was by no means the least of the house's strange attractions. He sniffed it as eagerly as a puppy while they passed through the gloom of the hall to the sombre dining-room where tea and his grandmother awaited them.

Until that moment, when first he set eyes on her, Jim Redlake had not the vaguest idea what his grandmother was like. At the place which he still called "home" there had been no photograph of her, all memories of Thorpe Folville having been suppressed out of deference to his father's irritable prejudices. She sat at the head of a heavy mahogany table, with her back to the window where a threefold canary cage, a miniature Crystal Palace of brass wire, rose between her and the light like a winged reredos, dominating the high table at which she celebrated tea. The world is a just one, for Mrs. Weston's teas had a sacramental quality and were celebrated, in another sense, through all High Leicestershire. The table was set with an ecclesiastical display of lace and silver, amid which the rich gilt and green of a Rockingham service shone with a delicate lustre, while the celebrant herself wore an air that was positively sacerdotal in its dignity and composure. She sat there as stiffly upright as though she were still strapped to the back-board with which the spines of young ladies of her generation had been straightened: a slight, well-proportioned figure in close-fitting black satin; old lace at her throat and wrists. On the curve of her bosom a gold locket, of somebody's hair, hung motionless, for though she was living (and more alive than most) her pose was so strictly maintained that she seemed not to breathe. Her face, a pure oval beneath a lace cap threaded with ribbon velvet, resembled her daughter's in regularity of feature without any of that ebb and flow of vivid colour which made Jim's mother's as changeful as the sea; her eyes had the same flashing glooms without any tenderness; even when they pierced Jim (as they now pierced him) their glance was as brightly impersonal as a bird's. Against that shining black satin, which sheathed her like steel, the skin of her hands and face had the clear matt whiteness of unglazed porcelain; from her head to her invisible feet, she had the fragile dead quality of the Rockingham tea-service, the exquisiteness of a work of art reflected in a lucent pool of mahogany. At her right hand sat a person of Jim's own age, a little girl with dark hair and violet eyes which surveyed their entrance with the suppressed curiosity of a well-behaved child in church. In the background a maid, a small shrunken thing with the constricted figure and features of a marmoset, stood mute as an attendant acolyte. So intent, indeed, was Jim's grandmother on her celebration and its choice setting, that their entrance had little effect on her composure, though her black eyes raked them with an indignant glance as if they were infidels who had entered a mosque in their shoes. By the uneasy smile that trembled on his mother's flushed face, Jim could see that she was almost as nervous as himself, till the doctor, incredibly daring, broke in with a brisk "Here they are!" and Jim's mother led him forward to kiss the softest and coldest cheek that his lips had ever touched.

"This is your cousin Lucy," his grandmother said, and the grave little girl with the violet eyes smiled and put out her hand—a warm and rather sticky hand which seemed to him the only human thing in that ceremonial chamber.

That smile and that handclasp served to put the boy a trifle more at his ease. He was so hungry too, after his long fast, that the delicious scones and jams and jellies with which the altar was burdened, engrossed him to the exclusion of all other thought or feeling. It was such a tea as no "party" at home had ever provided, and his grandfather, who had spoken no word since those of the introduction, appeared to enjoy it as ravenously as he did, while his mother, who ate nothing, sat quietly, like a bird in the presence of a cobra, and that quiet little girl, his cousin Lucy, watched him sideways with her violet eyes until the faithful marmoset, whose name was Eliza, whisked her away on the decree that it was time to practise, and the heroic rhythms of the "War March of the Priests" from "Athalie" accompanied their mastication from an adjoining room.

In the meantime Jim's grandmother was conducting an inquisition on his mother, to which he listened with breathless incomprehension.

"This is very sudden, isn't it, Elizabeth?" she asked.

"Yes. I only decided last night. Things were quite impossible."

"They were never anything else," said the old lady quickly.

"Oh, yes they were," Mrs. Redlake answered with a flush of spirit. "But now it's . . . different."

"The last book, I'm told, was scandalous. Quite disgraceful!"

"It was a very good book. Did you read it?"

"I? Of course not. Tell me. Elizabeth, who *is* this woman?"

"You wouldn't be any the wiser if I told you her name, mother."

"Is she a lady?"

For the first time Mrs. Redlake laughed. "A lady? Well . . . yes, I suppose so."

"Extraordinary! The fascination, I mean."

"No. He *is* fascinating."

The old lady sniffed, and one of the canaries broke out into a piercing trill.

"Only," her daughter went on, "he's cruel as well; he's ruthless; genius *is* ruthless."

Jim's grandmother tossed her lace cap. "Genius, indeed! I suppose you've not made any plans?"

"Of course not. I hadn't time. I haven't brought any luggage . . . not even a nightdress!"

"No luggage? How inconsiderate of you! It's simply giving people a reason for talk. You know what Thorpe Folville is. Margaret's coming home to-morrow."

"Father told me."

"So, if you have any idea . . ."

"But I haven't, mother. I haven't an idea of any kind in my head at present. Of course if my being here embarrasses you . . ."

"Don't be stupid, Elizabeth, please. I was thinking of the boy."

"So am I, mother. Don't you really think we had better discuss this later?"

"Much better," the doctor growled, coming in to the rescue. During the whole of this catechism he had kept an obstinate silence, like a lawyer whose function it is to hold a "watching brief." The sound of his sudden interruption made the old lady bridle.

"Have you got another headache, John?" she asked sharply.

"Yes, I *have* got a headache," he answered. "For heaven's sake cover up those canaries."

Jim's grandmother sighed. "You see! That's what happens whenever he gets upset," she said, putting all the responsibility on her daughter's shoulders.

"Oh, don't worry the girl, Jane," the victim answered wearily. He yawned, moved away from the table, and settled himself in a winged chair, lying back, with a white silk handkerchief thrown over his bald head.

"I think I'll take Jimmy upstairs," Mrs. Redlake said softly, with a smile that was like a caress. "He must be dead tired, poor child. It's been such a long day for him."

"Well, I suppose you know best," said the old lady, in a tone which implied that she didn't. "He's to sleep in your old room, and you'll have Margaret's—till she comes here to-morrow, that is. Then, of course, we shall have to make other arrangements. If there's anything you want, you have only to ask Eliza."

"Say good-night to your grannie, darling," Mrs. Redlake said, and so, having experienced another contact with the chill softness of his grandmother's slightly averted cheek, Jim was led from the darkening room into the still darker hall and up the stairs of varnished pitch-pine, whose knots made them look as though they had been carved out of slabs of tinned pineapple, to the bare little chamber which, thenceforward, was to be the axis round which his world revolved.

IV. *Polite Society*

IN SPITE of the astounding events of the journey, his strange surroundings, and the frilled nightdress, belonging to his cousin Lucy, with which Eliza the marmoset had supplied him, he slept like a top. No mocking landrail disturbed him that night with his craking. His only dream, if dream it were, was one of his mother, bending above him and smiling, in the pallid gleam of a nightlight, the first of these old-fashioned contrivances he had ever seen, which Eliza set floating in a round glass dish at his bedside.

He awoke in the early morning to two sounds that were unfamiliar: the screech of a peacock on the distant terraces of Thorpe Castle and a clatter of numberless hoofs on the village street beneath his window which came from the strings of hunters that took their exercise in the cool of the day. Through the lace-curtained window he could see the thatched eaves of the stable from which buff-breasted martins flew in and out with excited twitterings, while Ernest (as he supposed) made the yard re-echo with brisk morning sounds: the clatter of buckets, the plunk of a pump gushing water, the stamping of horses in their stalls and a blithe disjointed whistle as gay as a blackbird's—all typical of a county that lives for horse and hound.

The room itself was austere to the last degree, having no furniture beyond the bare necessaries of bed and wash-hand-stand but an enormous tallboy that occupied half the available space, and no adornment but a sampler, which hung on the wall opposite Jim's eyes, representing the continent of Africa. This last was enough in itself to excite his imagination. It had been made, in the year of Waterloo, by a great-great aunt, Julia Delahay of Trewern. Above its pink-coloured Southern extremity it was wholly embroidered in black, as a reminder by the pious sempstress to the impious beholder that the whole of its uncharted centre was abandoned to heathen savagery. This circumstance filled Jim with interest rather than horror —who knew what wonders and mysteries lay hidden in that black heart?—and by the time that his mother came to call him, already dressed, he had decided that his real vocation in life was that of an African explorer.

The sight of her dear face soon swept these plans away. It was full, that morning, of an especial tender gaiety. While he dressed she chattered to him as softly as the twittering house-martins. She seemed, indeed, as though overnight some burden had been lifted from her mind, as though she were determined that he must share her relief and happiness.

"You're going to drive with grandfather on his round," she told him. "Won't that be lovely?"

"Are you coming too?" Jim asked warily.

"No. I shall be busy; but that won't make any difference. And you mustn't be late for breakfast. Gran's very particular."

He was still rather scared of his grandmother, and told her so. "I don't think she likes me very much," he said.

She laughed. "Don't be foolish, darling! Of course she loves you. She thinks a great deal of you. You see you're her only grandson."

"Hasn't Lucy any brothers?" Jim asked.

"No, no. Auntie Eleanor died when Lucy was born. She was the eldest of us, you know."

Jim didn't know anything of the sort. So carefully had all mention of Thorpe Folville been expurgated from their life at home that his mother's relatives were no more than legendary figures; and though, of course, this visit was exciting, he couldn't be quite sure that he liked them even now. The place seemed, if not hostile, a little strange and dreamlike, and his thoughts would keep fluttering back in spite of himself to the home that he knew and could trust. Yet, even if he didn't "take to" these new surroundings instinctively, his mother was clearly so anxious that he should, that he tried to share her exaggerated enthusiasm.

Indeed, the sumptuous breakfast to which they descended made that easy. The gigantic home-cured ham on the sideboard, the jugs of thick cream, and the scones that the marmoset baked, crisp and powdered with flour, gave an impression of luxury and abundance that was sufficient to turn a head accustomed to such modest means as his. When they entered the room the sun was shining and the canaries trilling at the top of their voices; there was a smile of friendly welcome in Lucy's violet eyes; even the soft cheek of his grandmother, who had abandoned her ceremonial armour of satin for a homelier stuff, seemed less coldly inhuman than on the previous evening. The breeze that fluttered the lace curtains had a stimulating lightness; and when the doctor, his headache gone, came bustling in from the stables like a gay north-easter and carved him curled slices of ham with a surgical precision, they might all have passed for the happiest family party imaginable.

The only person who kept herself a little apart from the general ease was Mrs. Weston. To her, life was always real, always earnest. Habitually regarding her husband as a wayward and frivolous person, although, in point of fact he was stability incarnate, she considered herself responsible for the order of everything at the Grange from the sheen of the table silver to the details of his visiting list. However she might unbend, she could never be satisfied unless everything in the day's programme was cut, dried and docketed.

"Now you, John," she said, "are taking the boy on your round to Rossington, Cold Orton and Great Leesby. That means that you'll lunch at the bakehouse in Essendine and be back for tea." The doctor nodded. "Well, Margaret's arriving at Melton by the four-thirty; so Ernest will drive in Nimrod and take Elizabeth with him. The train time fits in quite well, doesn't it, Elizabeth?"

"Perfectly," Jim's mother assured her.

"Yes. That's very convenient. Now don't forget, John, Lady Ernestine's coming to tea at half-past four."

"I shan't forget, old lady," said his grandfather with a humorous glance at his mother, which Jim intercepted, implying that the old lady wouldn't let him forget in any case.

A small bell tinkled in the pitch-pine hall. "Surgery," said Mrs. Weston.

"Let 'em wait!" said the doctor, bravely, or rather in bravado—for a moment later he left the room with his tea unfinished. The clock struck nine, in a measured dogmatic manner, almost as if it had been trained in its work by Jim's grandmother personally. She glanced at it critically, to see if the fingers were on time with the strike. "Time to practise, Lucy," she said, and Lucy left them reluctantly. "Will you see that the boy is ready to start with your father at ten, Elizabeth?"

"Yes. All right. Come along, Jim," said his mother; and together they escaped, on their left Lucy's hesitant March of the Priests from "Athalie" (which Jim imagined to be a place, not an oratorio) and on their right the raised voice of his grandfather enquiring, from some patient who was obviously hard of hearing, as to the precise condition of somebody or other's bowels.

They went out into the cobbled yard, where the young man called Ernest was hissing his lungs out over the grooming of a big-boned bay. The air was all clean and limpid, like cold spring-water, and full of contented morning sounds—the tinkle of a blacksmith's anvil, the clucking of poultry, the snorting and stamping of the bay as Ernest told him to get over. They passed, close together, through a crowded kitchen-garden, which made the garden at home, which his father ostensibly kept, seem a tangled wilderness, to a wicket that led to a paddock where a flock of white geese trailed before them over the green in unhurried procession, and a pony kicked up his heels and scampered away from them. When they came to the grass his mother began to run, as though, for the first time in years, her feet had found their natural element. She ran down the slope like a whirlwind, and Jim ran beside her, till they came to a mossy spring in the trough of the valley.

"Lucy's mother and I," she told him breathlessly, "used to play here together for hours when we were children. In Spring there are kingcups, oh, and myriads of cuckoo flowers. Oh, there's so much to show you!"

She took his hand, and they panted upward. On the crown of the opposite slope ran a band of coppice, where a covey of young pheasants, all silvery brown, were feeding against the hedge, so tame and contented—like everything living that morning—that they let the pair watch them without moving, a confident, friendly gleam in their bright eyes. Jim could have stood there and watched them for ever, but his mother led him onward round the bend of the coppice into a corner of little mounds, a miniature mountain system, once mined, perhaps, for sand or for clay, but now clothed in close sheep-bitten turf and tunnelled by rabbits. In one of these little hollows they sat down together, a sweet-smelling dip of greenness, bloomed with thin harebells among which small butterflies, blues and heaths and coppers, fluttered lazily.

"Now this," she told him, "is the most secret place of all. When you're here you see nothing; it's hard to believe that anywhere else exists. I used to sit here for hours, darling, quite, quite alone. When I wasn't very happy, you know."

She sighed as she smiled. She was just like a child of his own age with him that morning, though it puzzled him to think how anyone could not be very happy in such an enchanting place, and to see that the eyes with which she surveyed him so lovingly were sad.

"I was just seventeen when I left here," she said, as though musing to herself. "To think of it! Only eight years older than you are now! How strange life is! Do you feel you'd be happy here, darling?"

The question surprised him. He thought it was lovely, he told her. "But are we going to stay here for a long time?" he asked. He was thinking, of course, of that pony, and wondering if the red-faced Ernest would teach him to ride.

"Well, possibly . . . perhaps," she said. "Things are rather unsettled. But you *do* love it, don't you?"

"I love to be anywhere where you are," he told her gallantly.

"Oh, my sweet!" And she took him in her arms and hugged him to death. "But, darling," she went on, "if I had to go away . . . for a little while . . . you'd be happy and brave too, wouldn't you?" His face must have shown her that he wasn't any too sure of that; for she went on to paint the joys of Thorpe Folville glowingly: what fun it would be for him to have Lucy to play with. He did like Lucy, didn't he? She was just like dear Auntie Eleanor.

Yes, he liked what he'd seen of her, he said—everything except her nightie, which rubbed his neck.

"Oh, we'll soon put that right," his mother laughed, "we'll find you another. Just think what fun it'll be for you to go out driving with grandpa on his long rounds, and all the animals, and Ernest, who'll show you everything, and the blacksmith's forge—and, oh, there are such heaps of things! And your grannie, too . . ." Her voice faltered a little, as though this part of the delights of Thorpe Folville were less easy to explain. Jim, too, had his doubts on that point, and said so bluntly.

She laughed. "Oh, you'll soon get used to that. Of course she loves you as much as any of us. Now we'd better go back; we mustn't keep grandpapa waiting."

And they raced down the hill again, so quickly that though the shadow of her possible departure and her evasion of the direct question still troubled him, the excitement of seeing the yellow-wheeled dogcart waiting, with the roan impatient in the shafts and the doctor swinging himself up to the high box like a boy and calling him to hurry up so as not to be left behind, was sufficient to banish every other thought from Jim's mind. No sooner had he reached his perch than the roan lurched forward impatiently. He had not even time to kiss his mother, though, as they turned to the left in the street, he could see her waving her hand for an instant, with a smile that was like a caress on her flushed face.

Bowling through the bright morning air behind the roan, Dr. Weston gave the impression of being much younger than his white beard had suggested, and far nicer than Jim had ever imagined. Up till then the only grown male whom he had known at all intimately was the stormy petrel George Redlake. In his grandfather, for the first time in his life, Jim encountered a happy man, the tenour of whose existence was like that quiet country, so sweetly breathing in the morning sun, rather than the landscape of stupendous chasms and fierce crags which George Redlake's resembled. Except in his querulousness Jim's father could never be a child. Even when he was most benignant—as under the flatteries of Mrs. Mudd—Jim was always aware of the mixture of condescension and resentment with which George Redlake regarded him. With his grandfather, on the other hand, he felt immediately and completely at home. He found himself actually being treated as an equal. Dr. Weston did not condescend to Jim's childishness; he made himself part of it; and though his knowledge of the natural world was as deep and his eyes as acute as George Redlake's, he didn't, as George Redlake would, impress his observations on Jim as knowledge of future usefulness or evidence of his own superior acuteness, but just as happy circumstances of their ordinary life together. He told Jim the names of flowers and butterflies in English-sounding medical Latin, not to show him how clever he was, or because he ought to be instructed, but because it was fun to do so.

He was as gentle, in his own way, as his daughter, Jim's mother, in hers; and it was this gentleness, more than all else, that reconciled the boy to the intimidating, starched severity of his grandmother.

That he wasn't by any means always so mild Jim had cause to know when, an hour or two later, in one of the villages they visited, the doctor turned like a tiger on a patient who had disobeyed his instructions; but even then, though his vocabulary would have done credit to a Master of Hounds, his abuse was so generous in its violence and so nicely (or coarsely) adapted to its object's understanding, that, though Jim thrilled and trembled, he had a feeling that it was nobler, somehow, than his father's finely-phrased bitterness. And whereas George Redlake, after white-flamed explosions, would retire into the Olympian murk of one of his "moods," John Weston's rage was as quickly spent as aroused, and five minutes later he and his victim were talking of wire and fodder and foxes as happily as though not one violent word had been spoken.

All through their slow progress that morning over the wide, pale fields, Dr. Weston had a gay word for everyone. It was a thin land of graziers, unprosperous, and yet contented. The frank Saxon faces that met them, firm and clear-eyed, had none of the grudging, suspicious looks to which Jim was used in the people of the Black Country, the more prosperous slaves of Industrial England. And though traces of feudalism surprised and flattered him in the men's touched caps and the ritual curtseys of white-aproned school-children who bobbed and smiled as the trap rolled past at the wave of his grandfather's whip, Jim felt himself enveloped in a warm air of friendliness which, though he was not the cause of it, was soothing to the heart and bred a sense of security.

One thing is quite certain, Jim earned his lunch that morning, for the roads between village and village in High Leicestershire were mainly tracks of tawny soil, unhedged, dividing the nibbled pastures where sheep and beasts were grazing; so that, vast as these wide fields were—Dr. Weston told him their names: Great Stygate, a hundred acres in itself, was one of them—Jim must have climbed down from his perch to open three score of gates before, in the heat of the day, they themselves and the roan stopped to bait at the Essendine bakery. A jolly party they made in the baker's kitchen, amid the smell of new bread and the chirrup of crickets. George Redlake, as Jim knew well, was always a little aloof and ill at ease in the company of working people, and this attitude had made Jim himself shy whenever he met them; but one couldn't be shy if one tried in his grandfather's company. The baker was an old friend of his, the tenant of the slow-sailed windmill which ground the doctor's corn for him, and the baker's plump wife and daughters, whom John Weston addressed by their Christian names, were as friendly with Jim as if they had known him all his life. It was a positive wrench to leave this happy, flour-dusted company and adjust his thoughts to another encounter with his grandmother. Ah, well, he reflected, at least his mother would be there. His heart was all warm with love for this new friend, his grandfather, his mind crowded with astonishing and amazing things he would have to tell her.

When, dazed with the thin, fresh air, he returned to the Grange, he ran upstairs to his bedroom at once to find her. She wasn't there. But the marmoset, staggering through the hall beneath an enormous silver tea-tray, explained that she had driven in to the station with Ernest to fetch his Aunt Margaret. In the meantime the mistress had left orders, extremely precise ones. As soon as he had washed his hands, not forgetting his nails, and brushed his hair, he was to present himself for tea. Pausing outside the drawing-room door, in a state of trepidation, for social ordeals of this kind had been unknown at the Dove's Nest, Jim wondered if, even though he couldn't wait for his mother's return, he might not get his grandfather to accompany him: but the doctor, by this time, was tinkling measures and medicine-bottles in the dispensary so busily that Jim hadn't the courage to disturb him. So, having given his wet hair a final smoothing with his hands, he opened the door.

As a matter of fact he needn't have been self-conscious, for nobody took the least notice of him. The room was all glorious within, being entirely furnished, as it seemed to him, with wrought gold. With the exception of the rosewood piano everything in the room was gilt, from the huge *gesso* mirror over the mantelpiece, reflecting a complete pastoral establishment, live stock and all, in Dresden china, to the Empire chiffonier, topped with tombstone marble and ornamented with plaques of painted porcelain, on which a French clock, of a design even more tormented, emitted a sweet tinkling chime, so glassy that it might have been echoed from the Venetian chandelier that drooped like a complicated icicle from the centre of the ceiling, yet made no more impression on the company than Jim's own entrance or the shrilling of a superior kind of canary, more elaborately housed than those in the dining-room, which fluttered in a gilt cage before the lace-curtained window.

In front of the beaded screen that blocked the fireplace, Mrs. Weston sat regally upright, dispensing tea and correct conversation. She wore her usual black satin of ceremony, but competed with the surrounding furniture in decoration, being adorned with as many rings, chains, brooches, lockets, bracelets and necklaces as a wonder-working madonna in a rococo shrine. Round the walls of the room, on a variety of gilt-legged chairs, sat a number of ladies, fashionably dressed in tight-bodiced costumes with puffed sleeves. In its centre, on a circular settee, divided by radial arms into three segments, three gentlemen, obviously clergymen, sat back to back, a fountain of masculine favour distributing streams of small talk in every direction.

The Established Church, in fact, formed the base on which the dwindling pyramid of Mrs. Weston's social achievements rested, and provided a backbone to all her entertainments. On the thin soil of High Leicestershire parsons grew thick as blackberries, and the apostolic poverty to which most of them were condemned made them yield the more easily to Jim's grandmother's rich fare; but, poor though his living might be—and his cloth was often worn shiny as Mrs. Weston's black satin—a clergyman was always a member of "county" society, and the lamentably democratic tendencies of the doctor, who was a Gladstonian Liberal and (though he read the lessons in church) a free-thinker, made her perpetually anxious to establish her own orthodoxy, particularly on such an occasion as this, when the return of her ewe-lamb, Jim's Aunt Margaret, coincided with a visit from Lady Ernestine Folville, the elder sister of Lord Essendine who owned Thorpe Castle.

The three clergymen, who sat back to back defensively, like bullocks in a field that hounds have invaded, Mr. Jewell of Thorpe, Mr. Holly of Rossington, and Mr. Malthus, the inappropriately labelled Vicar of Cold Orton, were among the most faithful of Mrs. Weston's spiritual supporters. Mr. Jewell, a tall, slovenly man, with a big beard, smelling of tobacco, who snorted as he breathed through a moustache that appeared to grow up into his nostrils, supplied, with his wife, the main social link between the Grange and the Castle. Mr. Holly of Rossington, a plump, white-handed bachelor with a moderate income of his own, was the principal apostle of culture in the neighbourhood, a "great reader" as the saying went, whose intimate feminine humour flattered the ladies to whom he talked gardening and presented the chosen blooms which his soft fingers arranged so deftly in cut glass specimen vases. Mr. Malthus, the incumbent of Cold Orton, a bleak hill-parish, was a frozen, dour, spare man, whose small eyes, magnified by concave spectacles, seemed to bulge in perpetual surprise at the length of the family beneath whose coils he struggled like a desiccated Laocoon.

It implied a deliberate compliment to his capacity for mass-production that when Mrs. Weston had presented Jim to a series of nodding bonnets and ingratiating female smiles, she should have offered him to Mr. Malthus, like a collector displaying a doubtful work of art to a connoisseur. At sight of him, Mr. Malthus's eyes dilated. "What . . . another?" they seemed to say.

"My daughter Elizabeth's boy," Mrs. Weston announced. "I'm afraid you don't remember her."

"What? The one who . . . Of course, of course," Mr. Malthus mumbled, suppressing the imprudence that came to his lips in response to a telepathic warning from his wife.

"*I* remember Elizabeth perfectly," broke in Mrs. Jewell, a squarely built woman with an enormous mouth, whose intimacy with the Castle licensed her to remember anything, however inconvenient. "And I've read her husband's last book. I'm told it's a great hit. Lady Essendine lent it me," she proudly declared.

Mr. Jewell, who never read anything but *The Field*, ran his fingers nervously through his long beard; but the plump Mr. Holly, who could not resist this opportunity of displaying his erudition, encouraged the subject.

"Well, and what did you think of George Redlake's book, Mrs. Jewell?" he enquired, with a catechismal air.

"Janet Essendine thought it extremely clever," Mrs. Jewell replied, as though, after that, there was really no more to be said about it. She brought out the sentence triumphantly. All afternoon she had been waiting for the opportunity of calling Lady Essendine "Janet" in a casual manner before the arrival of Lady Ernestine made it impossible.

"Well, well, *autres temps autres moeurs*; I like to be broad-minded," said Mr. Holly charitably. "Cleverness is all very well. In these days everyone's clever. Still, all the same, isn't it perhaps just a little too . . . too . . .?"

"It is our duty to consider the children," Mr. Malthus put in severely. "I haven't read this book, and I've no intention of reading it, but the children *must* be considered."

His wife, a spare little woman, nodded her head in emphatic agreement; Mrs. Jewell, having got off her "Janet" had no more interest in their opinion; and Mr. Holly, who had established the breadth of his culture simultaneously with a strict orthodoxy and was aware of an increasing discomfort on his hostess's face, clutched Jim's arm with a plump, white hand and drew him on to the settee beside him.

"Well, *you*'re none the worse for it, are you, old fellow?" he said, and proceeded to pay a tribute to Mrs. Jewell's exalted connections by asking how the zonal pelargoniums were looking at the Castle and if Lord Essendine was going to Cowes this year, continuing, as he did so, to massage Jim's thigh, like a cat pawing velvet, with an intimate benevolence from which he longed to escape. For the moment his existence seemed to have been happily forgotten by all the company with the exception of his cousin Lucy, whose shy eyes watched him continually, and another of the guests, a wisp of a woman in a jet-trimmed bonnet, whom he had heard addressed by his grandmother as Miss Minnet. This lady, while showing the most vivid interest in the conversation by glances, smiles and nods, in each of which the jet on her bonnet participated, was apparently dumb. Of all those to whom Jim had been introduced, her reception of him, though it had only consisted of an eager grimace and the pressure of a lace-mittened hand, had been far the warmest. Now, as he sat imprisoned by Mr. Holly's grip, Miss Minnet proceeded to claim his attention by a series of furtive beckonings and a wide-mouthed, voiceless articulation of the words "Come . . . here . . ." Her behaviour was so strange that Jim could only imagine that she wished to warn him of some scandalous impropriety in his clothes, but her summons was so urgent that he profited by a lapse in Mr. Holly's manipulations to approach her. At this she seemed shaken by a paroxysm of delight, hugging him with her thin arms and voicelessly exploding into a succession of incoherent whispers: "My darling Elizabeth's boy . . . *so* like her . . . sweet child . . . come and see me . . . Rose Cottage . . ." which were almost as unintelligible to Jim as the violence of the embrace that accompanied them, and might have continued indefinitely, if, at that moment, Eliza the marmoset had not flung open the door with the superb announcement: "Lady Ernestine Folville."

On these words the three clergymen rose to their feet like soldiers springing to attention, Miss Minnet released her victim, and Jim's grandmother moved forward with the serene magnificence of a religious statue suddenly come to life. At that moment, indeed Mrs. Weston was much more impressive than her noble visitor, a squat, middle-aged woman, above whose red face and wide-set, clear blue eyes, a straw hat, of the variety then described as a "boater" was tethered to a twisted bun of hair by black elastic. She was dressed from head to foot in an iron-grey cord tailor-made, whose coat-skirts, flared below a waist constricted like that of a Cretan figurine, accentuated rather than concealed an enormous bulge of hip. She had a frank wide smile of really beautiful teeth, and as soon as she had given Mrs. Weston and the rest of the company the benefit of this, accompanied by a series of brisk nods, she plumped herself down like a full sack on the triple settee, where Mrs. Jewell, who had been eagerly awaiting the opportunity of claiming her property, immediately joined her, while the clergymen with one accord scrambled to fetch her tea.

In the excitement of this arrival, Jim found himself happily abandoned by Miss Minnet, to whom Lady Ernestine's presence gave an air of expectant beatitude, like that of a plant-pot put out in the sun. He was hoping, in fact, to conceal his shyness in some corner, and seemed likely to do so successfully, when the calm voice of Lady Ernestine was heard demanding: "Mrs. Weston, who is that boy?"—and he immediately found himself illuminated by glances that were like converging floods of lime-light.

"Come here, Jim," his grandmother grimly commanded. "He's my daughter Elizabeth's child," she explained, as though reluctant to admit it. "I expect you've forgotten her."

"Forgotten?" said Lady Ernestine. "I remember her perfectly. The second, and the best of the bunch, in my opinion."

Mrs. Weston's face hardened, her dark eyes gleamed like those of an angry swan; from no other lips would she have allowed such a judgment to pass.

"Married a writin' fellow named Redlake, didn't she?" Lady Ernestine went on. "Janet lent me his book the other day. I forget the title—never can remember 'em. I'm told it's a great success. What did *you* think of it?"

The question was addressed to Jim's grandmother who, fortunately, had no need to answer it, for Mrs. Jewell snatched the opportunity of confessing, quite unnecessarily, that she agreed with Lady Essendine. Mr. Holly, who felt it his duty to testify as arbiter of literary elegance, declared that there was much to be said on both sides, whatever that meant, and Mr. Malthus, urged on by his grim little wife, was heard to murmur something about "one of these little ones."

"Well, *I*"—Lady Ernestine's blue eyes twinkled—"as an ordinary, ignorant person, must say I found it amusin'. Didn't you, Mr. Holly?"

"Distinctly," Mr. Holly affirmed, coming down with both feet, before he knew it, on the Essendine side of the fence. "Of course," he qualified, "some people might think it a little . . . er . . . what shall we say?"

"You can say what you like," replied Lady Ernestine. "Novels aren't written for schoolgirls. We're grown up people. We talk like that and we feel like that, and most of us would act like that if we had the chance and the inclination. *I* should, anyway. Of course you're a clergyman. Oh yes, I know all about that. What's he like, Mrs. Weston? Your clever son-in-law, I mean?"

But Jim didn't even listen for his grandmother's embarrassed reply. He had heard, on the cobbles of the *porte cochère*, a sound of slow hoofs. Ernest, with the big bay, had returned from Melton. In another moment he would find himself in his mother's reassuring company. He waited, breathlessly listening, as the hall door opened; and Mrs. Weston also clutched at the opportunity of evading Lady Ernestine's question.

"I think, if you'll excuse me," she said, "that must be Margaret. She's been for a whole year in Florence, you know," she explained as she swam to the door with a proud, swanlike motion.

At last! Jim thought. But the person who entered and flung her arms smotheringly round Mrs. Weston's neck was not his mother, nor even the least bit like her. From the moment when he set eyes on her Jim decided that he didn't love Auntie Margaret. To begin with, she gave him the impression of being much too big when she ought to have been little and sweet like his mother. And yet she wasn't actually big; it was her loose hair, her flopping straw hat, her long feather boa, the general diffuseness of her clothes and person which seemed to stream out into ribbons and loose ends and bits and bobs, that made her take up much more room than her physical requirements demanded. Her cheeks, now hot with excitement, her eyes, big, blue and excessively mobile, and her voice which was deep and rather loud, with a tendency to call attention to its owner by sudden dramatic accentuations, gave the general effect of a letter from a gushing correspondent written in a great hurry and a large sprawling hand and underlined recklessly. Beside or beneath her—for, physically she was entirely swamped by Auntie Margaret's embrace—Jim's grandmother seemed no longer cold and swanlike, but a modest and exceedingly maternal little hen, proudly parading her latest hatched turkey chick before an admiring barnyard. Mrs. Weston was as excited by Margaret's arrival as Margaret herself; as she fluttered forward to present her to Lady Ernestine, her matt white cheeks, whose coldness Jim remembered so well, were tinged with a colour that made her seem actually human and, strangely enough, more frightening for this new quality.

"My daughter Margaret, Lady Ernestine," she said.

There was a moment of silence, in which Lady Ernestine's critical eyes seemed to move over Margaret's figure like those of a deft pruner, lopping here a tuft of feathers and there a bunch of ribbons, reducing the unruly foreign growth to a more tolerable social shape. Finally, abandoning the job as far too complicated, she adjusted herself to an easy conversational politeness.

"Very nice to see you again," she said. "Did you have a good journey?"

"Well, of course the journey was rather a bore. They are, aren't they?" said Margaret effusively. "But London was *too* marvellous!"

Lady Ernestine sniffed. "I hate London. I'm afraid you'll find Thorpe Folville rather tame after all your exciting adventures."

"Oh, no, not a bit," Margaret answered innocently. "I think it's *too* sweet. It's a dear little place, and so *simpatico*."

Mr. Holly smiled and nodded a violent approbation, in order to show that he understood the Italian word. Mr. Jewell, who didn't understand it, hungrily chewed his beard, while Mr. Malthus surveyed this dangerously exotic charmer with complete disapproval as a possible threat to family life in the district; and since Lady Ernestine was silent, considering, apparently, that she had performed her social due, Mrs. Weston, who was too entranced to realize any of these attitudes, suggested a cup of tea.

"Oh, mother, how clever of you," said Margaret, "I'm simply *dying* for it!"

And with a jingle of bangles she divested herself of her feather boa, which she presented together with a flashing smile to the attendant Mr. Holly, who was the only available bachelor and thrilled to shine in that role if only for the sake of confounding his colleagues and exhibiting his charms to the eyes of the envious Miss Minnet.

But where was Jim's mother? That was all that Jim cared about. While Lady Ernestine was putting on her dogskin gloves and Aunt Margaret was gulping down her mother's admiration and Mr. Holly's pleasantries like a spoilt child gorging chocolates, Jim's eyes were anxiously set on the drawing-room door. In the midst of that crowded room he felt horribly lonely. There was nobody in it, with the exception of Lucy, who sat solemnly devouring the scene with her violet eyes, to whom he could turn for comfort or information. Evading another voiceless communication from Miss Minnet, who continued to grimace at him, he sidled over to his cousin.

"Do you think Gran will mind if I go and find mother?" he whispered.

"Go and find Aunt Elizabeth? Whatever do you mean?" she answered.

"Well, she must be upstairs. She came back with Aunt Margaret, didn't she?"

"Of course not. She went away by the train that came in just before Aunt Margaret's. Didn't you know she was going? How funny!"

"You mean that she's gone? She couldn't. I don't believe you."

Then the gilt room went blurred, the clatter of voices confused. To the scandal of himself and the whole company Jim Redlake burst into loud tears.

V. *Mrs. Weston Disposes*

HOW great a sacrifice of her pride the flight to Thorpe Folville had cost his mother, Jim Redlake never knew. Its effect was too suddenly shattering for him to question her motives, which, of course, needed no explanation in any case, because she was his darling mother and could do no wrong. In spite of the fact that he was her only companion, as passionately part of herself now as in the months preceding his birth, Jim knew as little of her secret soul as if he had never been born—even less, indeed, than George Redlake, to whom the vague incarnations of his literary fancy were actually more real than his wife's flesh and blood. From all she had told him Jim would never have imagined that his mother's childhood had been an unhappy one, any more than that the domestic atmosphere of the Dove's Nest was not one of Elysian bliss. Indeed, it was the unhappiness which she had suffered at Thorpe Folville and in her married life that made her so eager for him to imagine that Thorpe Folville was a kind of Lost Paradise and George Redlake the wisest, the gentlest and the most unselfish of men.

As a matter of fact, the two unhappinesses were related: if she hadn't hated Thorpe Folville, Jim's mother would probably not have made matters worse by eloping with his father. From her earliest childhood she had been taught to regard herself as quite negligible except as an encumbrance to the social ambitions which, even in that early period, possessed her mother's mind.

Mrs. Weston had come to Thorpe trailing clouds of questionable glory from Trewern, the Shropshire Manor House which her quite undistinguished ancestors, the older of the two border families of Delahay, had inhabited for a couple of centuries, convinced that she had married beneath her, yet so painfully anxious that nobody else should realize it that she couldn't see how this shameful appearance was accentuated by her insistence on her own superiority. How or where she had met John Weston or had been persuaded to marry him she had never divulged. Probably, in a moment of social inadvertence, she had fallen in love with him. Even now, at the age of sixty, her cold, classic features had a porcelain perfection that, conceivably, might once have been alive. No doubt it was her physical fineness that appealed by contrast to John Weston's expansive nature, and this sanguine and generous man, from whom Jim's mother inherited her impulsiveness, must have made a vivid suitor. His courtship, in any case, was so swift that, almost before she knew what had happened, Mrs. Weston found herself established in the inconsiderable station of a country doctor's wife and, even though she couldn't honestly despise him, a little ashamed of her husband.

Her position at Thorpe soon aggravated these feelings. In her part of Shropshire great landowners were scarce, and members of the small squirearchy from which she came still counted as stars of some magnitude; but at Thorpe she found her light dimmed not only by fixed constellations, such as the Folvilles, but by a whole solar system of planets which swam back into the social sky of the Shires in mid-October attended by a casual drift of November meteors, of uncertain origin and destiny, but none the less sparkling. Thorpe Folville became, in short, a covert-side enclave of smart, and even, occasionally, of august society, amid which she, Jane Weston, was positively nobody.

She found it humiliating; and yet, as she brooded over it, she couldn't help realizing that her humiliation was tempered by opportunity. Even though she herself, earth-bound by her husband's profession, couldn't hope to shine in that celestial company, there seemed no reason why she shouldn't do so vicariously. Her first daughter, Eleanor, Lucy's mother, became the centre of all these brooding ambitions. From her birth she was destined to make a brilliant match. Every unit of force in her mother's potent character became concentrated, from that instant, on this ambition. As fortune would have it, the child was beautiful. All John Weston's earnings, which were considerable, for the man was trusted wherever he went as a sportsman, were devoted to enhancing that beauty by every refinement of dress, education and setting that they could buy. No sacrifice was so great, no discomfort so intolerable as to deter Jane Weston from this selfish, selfless devotion. It absorbed her whole life so completely that when, some years later, Elizabeth, Jim's mother, was born, she could give to the new arrival nothing but grudging as a possible rival to Eleanor's future. From the first she treated Elizabeth as a sheer inconvenience, or, at best, as a convenient peg for her sister's discarded finery. When Eleanor, in the bloom of her pampered elegance, asserted the self-will in which she had been encouraged by marrying not—as her mother had hoped—the son of a Duke, but a veterinary surgeon with no antecedents and a sad reputation in horse-coping—even then Mrs. Weston was too obstinate to admit any error of judgment.

By this time she was so accustomed to considering the younger sister as the negligible person her own neglect had made her that she continued to regard her as such, and proceeded to devote as much of her energy as had survived the outrage of Eleanor's marriage to beginning all over again—not with Elizabeth, whose social education had been scamped, but with their third daughter, Margaret, then a pig-tailed schoolgirl. This renewal of hope thrust Elizabeth more than ever into the backround. The fact that she happened to be her father's favourite, which was natural enough considering their likeness of temperament, merely made Mrs. Weston more jealous, not because she herself grudged the child the doctor's affection, but because this preference might impair his concentration on the only thing that mattered to her, which was Margaret's future.

When, a few years later, Eleanor atoned for her unfilial behaviour by dying in childbirth, she adopted the baby, Lucy, not out of any regretful tenderness, but because it didn't suit her book to have any member of the family living in such disreputable circumstances; but when, as a natural result of her policy, Elizabeth eloped from the second-rate boarding-school at which she had been encouraged to stay on as a pupil-teacher, Mrs. Weston, who really couldn't afford to dissipate any more energy or money, just washed her hands of her—the more willingly since George Redlake fortunately didn't embarrass her by living in the district, and Elizabeth herself was too proud to ask for the help which she needed. Indeed, Mrs. Weston had made it so plainly understood that she had finished with her, that from the day of her marriage until that of her precipitate flight with Jim, Elizabeth Redlake had never even dreamed of revisiting Thorpe Folville.

That return, apart from the opportunity it gave her of saying "I told you so," was regarded by Jim's grandmother as an unqualified insult. To begin with, it couldn't have been timed more inappropriately, coinciding, as it did, with the opening of Margaret's matrimonial campaign. One grandchild in the house was quite enough to go on with, and, by the time that her daughter arrived, the old lady had hardened herself—if that process were possible—to the duty of declaring that she couldn't do with another.

On the night before, while Jim slept the sleep of complete exhaustion in Lucy's frilled nightdress, the Empire drawing-room had witnessed a passionate scene. While Elizabeth poured out the whole story of George and Mrs. Mudd, her mother listened with complete unconcern. Although all this was only to be expected, it simply didn't interest her. Financial help, of course, was out of the question. Margaret's future . . .

"I've never asked you for money, mother," Elizabeth told her, "and I've no intention of doing so."

That was good as far as it went. Then what did she want?

"I want to leave Jim with you. I can't give him up to that woman."

"You say that she's rich. It sounds like an excellent opportunity. I really don't see how you'll ever manage to educate him otherwise."

"Oh, *can't* you understand how I feel?"

Mrs. Weston couldn't. "What you feel is entirely beside the point," she declared, judicially. "This is simply a storm in a tea-cup. What you evidently don't realize is the fact that the man is bluffing. He has no power whatever to deal with the child in this way. A few years ago, he might have done what he liked with him; but now the law has been changed. According to your father, you now have an equal say in the matter. If you choose to assert your rights you can do so."

"My rights!" Mrs. Redlake laughed bitterly. "You don't know George."

"No, I'm thankful to say I don't," Mrs. Weston replied, with the result that the mild Elizabeth rose like a tigress in George's defence.

"Well, you can't have it both ways," Mrs. Weston coldly observed when the storm had subsided. "You say you're fond of your husband. In that case I think you might trust him to do what is best."

"I can't let him take Jim away from me. I'll never submit to that."

"Well, then, as your father says, you need only assert your rights. The law's on your side."

"The law! Do you really think George cares twopence for that? Our life's wretched enough already, God knows, what with money and the rest of it. He'd go mad if I crossed him directly—don't I know him! But somehow I don't think he'd mind if I left Jim with you."

Mrs. Weston shook her head obstinately. "I think it's time you faced the facts. When you married this man you never did your father or myself the honour of informing us, much less of consulting us. I'm only thankful you did marry him. It might have been worse."

"Mother . . .!" Mrs. Redlake protested, "You're not suggesting . . ."

"Please let me finish. For more than ten years we've not heard a single word from you, and now, all of a sudden, you apparently expect us to treat you exactly as though you'd behaved in a dutiful manner. Quite naturally this disturbance has given your father a headache, poor man. But you can take it from me that he will think just as I do. You've made your own bed and must sleep in it. You've no shadow of right, after what has happened, to expect us to deal with your troubles."

"I wasn't thinking of rights, there's no question of rights . . ." Mrs. Redlake began. Then, hesitating on the verge of tears, she seemed to take courage. "If you won't have Jim," she said slowly, "there's only one way out of the difficulty."

"Of course," Mrs. Weston said primly. "The natural way is to agree with your husband."

"No, no, mother. I don't mean that. There's another way that I've thought of. I shall have to divorce him."

"Divorce?"

Mrs. Weston leapt from her gilt chair as if she had been stung.

"Divorce?" she repeated. Out of the whole English language this word was the only solvent of her adamantine core.

"If I were driven to it," her daughter went on, "I don't think there'd be much difficulty. George tells me they're only friends—and I suppose I believe him—but if it came to evidence he'd find it awfully difficult to explain and I'm sure they'd let me have Jim. Of course, I don't *want* to do anything of the kind; but if I'm driven to it . . ."

Mrs. Weston was not even listening. Only recently the firmament to which, through Margaret, she aspired had been shaken by certain erratic stellar conjunctions: a scandalous *cause celèbre* which had furnished the Shires with gossip for months. A divorce in her own family would make a pretty beginning for Margaret's matrimonial campaign. The word "divorce" conjured up visions of headlines in the local papers, behind which the figures of her pet parsons, the chosen supporters of her social state, loomed like accusing angels: Mr. Jewell, her special envoy at the Castle, sorrowfully chewing his beard; Mr. Malthus, denunciatory, goggling through his glasses at this betrayal of "the family"; Mr. Holly, washing his white hands of her and hers, on his lips that mocking smile which she hated yet had to put up with just because he happened to be so popular. A divorce in the house where, only a month ago, the Bishop had actually honoured her by taking tea! How the women would talk! That cat Edna Minnet, for instance, mouthing away. Mrs. Weston went chilly with horror at the mere thought of it.

"You must be mad as well as wicked, Elizabeth," she said. "You can't mean what you're saying."

"Of course I mean it. That is, if I'm driven to it. Oh, mother, can't you understand?"

"That a daughter of mine," Mrs. Weston began, but could go no further. "I must talk to your father about this," she said at last. "I knew, when the telegram came, that you would bring trouble; but I never expected such utter, wilful selfishness as this!" As she rose majestically and sailed out of the room with her satin trailing, the ormolu clock gave a gay little tinkling laugh. These hypocritical Victorian moralities were really too funny! They manage these things, it seemed to say, better in France. And incidentally, it is nine o'clock.

By half past ten, thanks to Elizabeth's monstrous but inspired suggestion, the whole matter was settled. Mrs. Weston found her husband with his bald head still hidden under a handkerchief, but a little better. Even when he wasn't in the throes of a headache, which made him embrace peace at any price, the doctor was in the habit of submitting, with a tolerant smile, to his wife's vagaries. Provided he were allowed to hunt his three days a week and satisfy the simple absorbing passions of his own life, he was perfectly prepared to let her have her own way. When her schemes miscarried, as sometimes happened, she couldn't blame him; it was salutary anyway, on occasion, for her to appear ridiculous. On the other hand, when they came off, as they did more often, he couldn't help feeling an amused admiration for the hard little creature's sublime impertinence, quite apart from the fact that these triumphs made her complacent and life much easier.

Her capitulation in this instance, where his fondness for Elizabeth—the one sentimental attachment for which he was prepared, at a pinch, to fight—might have compelled him to make a stand, was an act of Providence. He already owed Elizabeth a debt of honour for the pride which had prevented her from making claims on his courage before. Now it filled him with wonder and gratitude to realize that she had managed to put the fear of God—or publicity—into her mother without his aid; and when Mrs. Weston, shuddering at the dreadful alternative, actually proposed that Jim should remain at Thorpe Folville, he could hardly believe his own luck. There, at one blow, he saw the discharge of his debt to Elizabeth, and the fulfilment of a recurrent desire which, vaguely haunting his thoughts as he grew older, had asserted itself that afternoon on the platform at Melton when first he set eyes on Jim.

In his private life, so ordained by the interests of women, Dr. Weston had often wished that he had a son—more than ever in these later years when, thanks in the main to the strictness of his wife's economies, he had become, by insensible degrees, a man of property, and found, to his own surprise, an abstract pride in possession. Of late, as he jogged through the fields from village to village, the satisfaction with which he surveyed the lands and farms that were his, the kempt hedges innocent of wire, the coverts and gorses, the trim farms dominated by that slow-sailed windmill which ground the corn from his plough and served as hunting landmark for that classic ground, his mind was besieged at times by twinges of melancholy. When he was gone, he thought, who would care for any of these things? Whose horses would stamp and whinny on crisp October mornings in his loose boxes? This heritage, such as it was, was one for men, not for women.

And there, on the platform at Melton, shyly clinging to Elizabeth's arm, stood a boy, flesh of his flesh, a grandson, an heir. Those memories and this vision came back to him as he listened, curiously elated, to his wife's indignant narration. The scandal of a family divorce left him quite unmoved. Such things must happen as long as men were men, and women were women. There would even be a certain satisfaction in shocking that solemn oaf Jewell with his childish ritual and his snob of a wife. And poor Jane, for that matter, would be none the worse for another set-back. But when the suggestion of keeping Jim at Thorpe Folville arose, his heart clutched at it with a hungry excitement which made him forget his headache.

"If you think that the boy should stay here," he said, "I quite agree. But what about Elizabeth?"

"Elizabeth has thrown her whole life away without consulting us. It's no business of ours. Apart from all else, there's nothing for her to do here, and I've no intention of letting poor Margaret's future be complicated by *her* being here. She must go. I refuse to take the child on any other condition."

"I suppose she'll go back to Redlake?"

"I don't know. That's her obvious duty. But that as I say is no business of ours."

"Is she short of money? I had scarcely any chance of speaking to her on the drive home. The boy has sharp ears."

"Money? I don't know. I haven't mentioned it," said Mrs. Weston firmly. "Isn't it enough that we're proposing to take the child off her hands? In any case we can't afford to help her. Margaret, naturally, comes first. By the way, she can catch the train that leaves Melton just before Margaret's arrival."

His silence assented; but next morning, before the household assembled for breakfast amid torrential orisons of canary-song, the doctor had beckoned Elizabeth out of the pitch-pine hall into his surgery and slipped a cheque, written in his own flawless copperplate, into her hand. He did this with the air of a conspirator, for Jim's grandmother, who kept the books of the practice, handled all the money that entered the house with the exception of the sums which the doctor received from the sale of horses or cattle: a private account from which he dispensed innumerable small charities quite unknown to her. The cheque which he drew that morning cancelled his debt. He signed it with a curious glow of satisfaction. It was a small price to pay, after all, for the thing that he wanted most on earth.

VI. *Paternal Rights*

THAT evening Jim's mind was as black and empty as the heart of Julia Delahay's African sampler. He had been led from the scandalized drawing-room in a state of loud, inconsolable grief and bundled, still sobbing, into bed by the marmoset, whose invasion of the intimacies of his toilet he strongly resented. At that moment he hated Thorpe Folville more than any place on earth—not only the gaunt, empty house with its strange smells and exotic furniture, but everyone in it from the officious Eliza upwards.

All these people were imbued with a grotesque, unreal quality, as coldly inhuman as the touch of his grandmother's soft cheek. That elegant black-satined figure, whose stony composure had not been troubled to the quivering of a hair by his disgraceful exit, now dominated his imagination like a witch in a fairy-tale. With an equal discomfort he remembered his Cousin Lucy, so primly cool in her white smocked silk, whose big eyes had watched his uproarious departure with an air of sly curiosity which was the more unbearable because of her age and sex. As for Aunt Margaret, he had frankly hated her at sight. She was so florid, so effusive, so awfully, obviously on the top of herself, so brutally entertained by the sight of the abysmal agony which nobody in the world but his mother could have understood. Even his memory of that drive in the yellow-wheeled dog-cart and the lunch at Essendine had lost its fine savour. His grandfather, enthralling companion though he might be, was still a stranger. Everything at Thorpe Folville was strange, and, if only for that reason, sinister, and his soul was an empty blackness that only his mother could fill.

Yet, miracle of miracles, a week later all was changed. There were moments, of course, when the consciousness of that central void dawned on him with the uneasy suggestion of a vague promise made and forgotten or of some familiar object missing from its place. And once, when the friendly postman actually handed him a letter from his mother—the first real letter he had ever received in his life—he experienced a sudden pang, not so much of remembered loss as of wonder that the world to which they had belonged was still in existence. It came, not from the Dove's Nest, but from an address in Wimpole Street, London, and told him nothing except that she loved him and was happy and hoped that he would be happy and good as well. The most curious thing about it was that the paper smelt of her. It was almost as if the most subtle essence of her physical personality pervaded it, and this sudden perception, striking like a lightning flash, cut the threads of his present consciousness so that it seemed, for a moment, as if she were there beside him.

Yet what he yearned for then was not so much her presence as the opportunity of telling her about the thing which, at that instant, was absorbing his mind: the sixty-four varieties of match-boxes, all of them different, that Ernest, the stableman, had collected and proudly displayed in the jackdaw's nest, divinely smelling of horses and hay and saddle-soap, where he slept. The ambition of equalling or perhaps surpassing this feat, which was Ernest's life-work, would have transcended all other interests, if, at that instant, his interests had not been so many. But really, in those first weeks at Thorpe there was no end to them. When every sense was so presently, so violently assailed, how should a young and eager mind have struck with the volatile particles which clung, faintly diluted, to those written pages?

The perfumes of that summer at Thorpe were too potent to surrender their place to anything so unsubstantial, too various to be compounded in a single essence or contained by the imagery of words. Yet in them that whole summer found life, and would go on living imprisoned and preserved as long as Jim's heart pumped blood into the brain that had caught them: The sleepy smell of tossed hay, heaped light as a cloud on a wain that left wisps of fragrance on thorned hedges by which it swayed, drooping down, when its creaking had died away, upon heavier, low-lying odours of meadowsweet, elder and hot brier that filled the lanes to their minty ditches. Then honest stable smells, of which Ernest's person was a walking pomander: the sweat of horses, and hoof-oil, saddle-soap and harness-blacking: barn-smells of mice and musty linseed-cake piled in earthen slabs; the sweet odour of cows, rolling back to the byre with their mild, lustrous eyes and swinging udders; the smell of sheep pattering in through a cloud of dust; the smell of a dim apple-loft draped in cobwebs; the appetizing wafts of Sunday roasts trotted back from the bakehouse by village children; more mysterious and provocative still, that sharp aroma of tinctures which ebbed continually through the pitch-pine hall to mingle with the pot-pourri fragrance of the Empire drawing-room and challenge the ancient odour of dog-eared books that slept on the study shelves amid pungent naphthaline fumes of a butterfly cabinet.

And if one strand of sense were broken or thinned to gossamer, another would soon reinforce it, from the clattering hoofs of horses at exercise, to which Jim woke, the energetic stable noises with which Ernest called attention to his early activity, the scream of a peacock on the castle terraces, through all the drowsy noon-sounds of scythe and creaking cart-wheel embroidered by thin anvil-tinklings from the smithy, to the stirring piano rhythms of "Athalie"—Cousin Lucy's *leit-motif*—and the passionate ballads of the day, *Sweet Marie* and *Douglas Gordon*, whose performance, in a voice on which no expense had been spared, was the crowning glory of Aunt Margaret's social panoply. And then, in the pale summer night, a soft drumming of moth-wings, the infinitesimal shrilling of bats that fluttered their giddy webs in and out of the arch of the *porte-cochère*; or perhaps, in the dead small hours, the startling clang of the doctor's night-bell and the covert-side oaths that he muttered as he went stumping downstairs.

These impressions of scent and sound sank more deeply into Jim's brain than those of form and colour. Indeed, the Thorpe Folville scene, as he first perceived it, was so subdued in the contours of its abounding greenness that it seemed no more than a vague background for the people who moved across it. These, as they defined themselves, showed colours far less formidable than those in which the first terrors of strangeness had painted them. No innocent soul, to begin with, could conceivably suspect or resist the direct simplicity of Dr. Weston. The old man was so frank, so jolly, so boyishly interested in the things which they enjoyed together in spite of the fifty years by which their ages were separated, that Jim found his company almost as easy as that of his mother, who, though the boy didn't realize this, derived so much from him. In some ways Jim found him even more understanding than her. The doctor, after all, was a creature of his own sex. All distinctions of age apart, Jim and he were two males, inhabiting a world of women; and this bond in itself gave their friendship a secret air of conspiracy and protest, which Jim's grandmother, fortunately, didn't appear to perceive.

At the moment her energies were so engrossed in organizing Margaret's return that she was thankful to see her husband kept quiet with a new plaything. In any case she hadn't come badly out of the predicament which George Redlake had forced on her. Elizabeth had complaisantly removed herself, and even if Jim stayed on at Thorpe Folville for a while, two children were not much more difficult to feed than one, and Lucy, poor darling, was sadly in need of a playmate. So, once having accepted Jim, Mrs. Weston exhibited all the charm of which she was capable, buttering the new kitten's paws so generously that he began to like her and see what a kind old lady she really was, in spite of the intimidating touch of that smooth cold cheek.

But his greatest intimacy, naturally enough, was with Lucy. Up to that time all the games which he hadn't played with his mother had been solitary; there were no other children near the Dove's Nest and only a parrot at Mrs. Mudd's, so Lucy was the first creature of his own age he had ever known. At first he felt rather scared by her watchful eyes. They followed him with a gaze so questioning that he felt like some timid young animal introduced into another's cage. It took him some time to realize that she was a child like himself, a companion fit for all those strange adventures of the senses of which life at Thorpe consisted—more than that, an experienced guide to all its mysteries. Yet even when their friendship had become more established and made firm by the fact that they were two children in a grown-up world with innumerable small, and sometimes faintly guilty secrets that nobody else would understand, there remained, in Lucy's sex, a difference which Jim found completely baffling.

This difference was borne in on him first by a shocking incident when, one evening, full of enthusiasm, he had burst into the room at the moment when Eliza was giving Lucy a bath. The marmoset had sprung at him and bundled him out in a perfectly desperate defence of the proprieties. "Oh, you *rude* boy!" she had cried. And Jim, behind the slammed door, couldn't think why. He was rather ashamed as well as affronted, since, for quite a while after this, Eliza regarded him with shocked, offended eyes, nor would Lucy, when she was consulted, condescend to enlighten him. She became evasive, almost patronizing, as though his offence were related to some finer quality in herself which he, as a mere boy, could never hope to fathom.

Often, when they were playing quite happily together, this secret barrier of her sex would rise between them, giving her a prim air of mysterious superiority, implying a sort of natural prerogative which Jim found extremely irritating because, even if she were two years older, she wasn't so strong as he was. The fact that she wore petticoats didn't give her the right to take refuge behind them whenever she found it convenient. She couldn't, in short, have it both ways. Yet she always did—not only with himself but with the brood of the Malthus boys, with whom, through those summer holidays, they sometimes went to tea. Not only would she suddenly comport herself like a little queen among these hungry yahoos, whose whole lives were apparently centred round the food with which poor Mrs. Malthus found it so difficult to satisfy them, but, all of a sudden, she would assert her ridiculous pretensions by dispensing favours and preferences that sent Jim wild with annoyance and—curiously enough—with jealousy. And then, when for hours he had writhed beneath her contempt, she would suddenly and deliberately set out to win him back again with a sly humility so barefaced that it staggered him.

Jim resented these puzzling feminine wiles which Lucy deployed so capriciously; yet not even they could affect the solidity of their common dislike for their grandmother's darling Margaret. From the moment when she entered the house that spoilt child regarded it simply as a setting for her own exotic graces, and Mrs. Weston seemed to encourage her. Although Auntie Margaret considered Thorpe Folville a bore, she evidently intended to be mistress of it. Her mother—and through her the doctor—were completely under her thumb. The servants were slaves to whom her service was a privilege. Lucy and Jim she classed together as "the children," at most times a necessary nuisance, but at others, when they could be useful to save her plump legs, objects of condescension.

"Run and fetch me my banjo, Jim," she would say. It was always a question of running and fetching, though Auntie Margaret herself was as strong as a lazy young horse. And Jim hated that banjo—not only its twangy sound with which she accompanied the coon-songs that were just "coming in," but the very appearance of its parchment belly, its inlay of mother-of-pearl and the mane of multi-coloured ribbons that hung from its neck, to which Mr. Holly, with mauve, was the latest gallant contributor. Those ribbons were to Aunt Margaret the refined equivalent of scalps to a Red Indian. Each of them in its flaming variety represented the fate of some hapless male victim of her voice or her person. When she had nobody else for an audience—and she just couldn't live without talking—she would pinion poor Lucy and show them off to her, recounting, in excited detail, her adventures with the Conte This or the Marchese That; a narrative interlarded with kittenish Italianisms in the wake of which her latest, poor little Mr. Holly, came mauvely trailing.

"As if I should dream of marrying a country clergyman!" she said. *"Ma che sciocchezza!"* And then she would explain to Lucy just how she had "led them on" and with what skilful cruelties she had preserved her virtue. One of them, the Duca di Montecaprese, had insisted on informing grandpapa of his intentions, or rather, made tactful enquiries about her dowry. "But I wouldn't be *that* kind of Duchess," said Aunt Margaret scornfully, although apparently she could have made her choice of the entire Tuscan aristocracy, and had made a signal concession by accepting a yard of homage from Mr. Holly. These confessions, to which Lucy was compelled to listen out of sheer intimidation, were so scattered with a Vallombrosian drift of Italian phrases as to be almost unintelligible. Jim and Lucy together concluded that they were the names of Aunt Margaret's suitors, among whom a romantic gentleman called *Ponte Vecchio* was easily the most prominent.

After this vast amatory experience it seemed somewhat strange that Aunt Margaret should trouble to set her cap at a little boy like Jim. Perhaps it was the unresponsiveness into which he instinctively stiffened that egged her on; she couldn't admit the fact that any male creature however young could possibly resist her. She therefore invented a detestable convention that he was the last of her conquests, which he wasn't at all, and maintained it by taking it for granted that he was dying to kiss her. When Jim didn't rise to this she would tease him and ask why he was so shy, and when that had made him really shy, would smother him with an orgy of kisses which, though they weren't so physically objectionable as Mrs. Mudd's, were an outrage that he suffered impatiently. He didn't tell her that the only person he liked to be kissed by was his mother or, at bedtime, by Lucy, whose lips were so warm and soft. There was something disgusting about Aunt Margaret's kisses, and he thought all this talk about being engaged and married extremely silly.

Sometimes, as a special treat, Aunt Margaret would sing to them. She could never resist singing to anyone, if she had half a chance, and in this Jim's grandmother encouraged her. When Aunt Margaret wanted to sing she became quite ruthless, like an unbridled force of nature or a prophet inspired. Nothing could stop her. She would pour into the gilt drawing-room like the Ganges (or perhaps the Arno) in flood, sweeping Lucy off the piano-stool and scattering the priests (from "Athalie") like so much driftwood. And then she would lift up her voice, up and up she would lift it into perfectly dizzying *solfeggii* until every canary in the house was roused to a shrilling frenzy of competition. As a matter of fact her voice, though much too powerful for the room, was not a bad one and had been educated in the best Florentine tradition of *bel canto*; the trouble was that she couldn't even sing scales without an audience and that Jim and Lucy would be dragged in from their play to represent a listening multitude, while Eliza, awed and delighted by the sheer volume of output, hopped round with a duster, just like an organ-grinder's monkey. Whether she was describing the watery death of Douglas Gorden—and Jim heard so much of that story that he could never, in after life, meet anyone with either of those names without a twinge of nausea—or twanging her beribboned banjo to one of the naïve little Tuscan folk-songs which represented her secondary armament, Aunt Margaret's powers of fascination were so concentrated on her skeleton audience, with such rollings of the bust and eyes and such archness of look, that Jim felt like a small bird, bewitched by the swayings of an overgrown cobra—which was, doubtless, what Aunt Margaret intended Mr. Holly to feel under similar circumstances.

One evening when Jim had been violently snatched from gloating over Ernest's match-boxes to hear Aunt Margaret's practice, the front-door bell rang, and a strange though somehow familiar voice was heard in the hall.

Aunt Margaret as was her custom when any stranger, potentially eligible, drifted within ear-shot of her siren rock, incontinently abandoned her soaring *solfeggio* in midair and lapsed into a ballad of the most ravishing sentiment, above which heavy and distinctly masculine steps were heard accompanying Eliza's patter into the dining-room. In the middle of the third verse the marmoset poked her head round the door and beckoned to Jim, who was only too pleased by this offer of escape until Eliza, with whispered injunctions to silence, mysteriously compelled him upstairs and into his bedroom.

"Now mind you stay here, Master Jim," she said, "till your grandmother sends for you."

Eliza herself was so palpably impressed by the seriousness of her mission that Jim had to obey her. The whole house lay crushed beneath the weight of this ominous arrival. Aunt Margaret stopped singing. Even Ernest, for once, had abandoned his disjointed hissing and whistling. No whimper of bird-song was heard; not an anvil-tinkle came from the forge nearby. Over all hung a thundery silence that was positively frightening. Something dreadful, Jim felt, had happened or was going to happen.

The dreadful thing which had happened was George Redlake. At the time of Jim's mother's flight he had been too engrossed in the end of his book and Mrs. Mudd to worry his head about her. George was like that. This complete absorption in his creative labours was one of the numerous qualities in which, without quite achieving it, his quality resembled that of genius. For more than a month he had deliberately dismissed the domestic cataclysm from his conscious mind, feverishly working against time and the smarting sense of a dastardly conspiracy against him.

These handicaps of celestial spite were the recognised accompaniments of a masterpiece's nativity. But as soon as the book was born he saw things differently, or rather permitted himself to see them at all for the first time. He perceived, as Jim had noticed long ago, the striking resemblance of Mrs. Mudd to her parrot. He perceived that Mrs. Mudd was not only a born bore but an intense one, which made it far worse. He realized with a thrill which he was at pains to conceal from himself that the novel which he had published in the Spring had become a howling success, and himself a made man, so confidently established that he no longer had any need of an Egeria so moth-eaten as that poor bundle of feathers.

Finally he awoke to the fact that his wife and child had run away from him. That flight, in itself, was not permitted to disturb him. Since Jim's embarrassing birth George Redlake's passionate relations had been less intimate with his wife than with the idealized females of his fiction, and the way in which she failed to appreciate him had even, on occasion, added zest to his tragic destiny. That was all very well before he had made a success; but now that the papers were hungry for personal gossip about him—his appearance, his manner of life, his methods of work—the fact that his wife had just calmly walked away from him appeared undignified. So, armed with the consciousness of being a public figure and elated by the shock which he was giving to that harpy Mudd, he travelled down to Melton, first-class, and drove out to Thorpe Folville with the magnanimous intention of "putting things straight."

The sight of his novel piled on the station bookstalls—where he saw it placarded as "Redlake's Mordant Masterpiece"—together with the unusual luxury of damning expense, brought George to Thorpe Folville in an airy mood. He looked forward with condescension to a poignant scene (how well he could "do" things of that kind!) in which the unsuspected nobility of his inner nature would be displayed. A great man, wise as he was good; that set the key of it. Perhaps the conception was a little on the popular side. Still, a writer who had proved his hand at "mordant masterpieces" might surely be allowed to show his virtuosity in a happy ending.

As he drove out from Melton he could see the situation take shape in a new kind of novel: Elizabeth's tender remorse; Jim's childish bewilderment; the profound impression his visit, in the character of a celebrity, would make on that simple old lady his mother-in-law. He pictured her as plainly and rather dowdily dressed, with ringlets perhaps, thin, tremulous hands, and, certainly, steel-rimmed spectacles. She would be sitting with her feet on a hassock in the afternoon light reading the great scene in Chapter Twelve of his book; and when the rough country girl announced him she would appear to be fluttered and say something perfectly platitudinous: "Mr. Redlake, this *is* a surprise!" or "How small the world is!"—No, that wouldn't do, of course, but something of that kind.

If he hadn't been made insensitive by success, George Redlake might have smelt something sinister—as Jim did—in the silence that received him. He didn't, because at the moment all the imagination he possessed was engaged in absorbing the useful part of his surroundings: the heavy mahogany furniture, the triptych canary-cage; the muted obbligato of Aunt Margaret's ballad—the whole setting so pat to his novelistic purpose. Even when Jim's grandmother finally swam into the room, an absolute negation of everything he had imagined, he was too obsessed by his fancy to know what he was in for.

"My name," he said, "is George Redlake," and waited for the appropriate effect of awed recognition. None was forthcoming. Mrs. Weston stood stock still, composed and regal, like a china statuette of Queen Victoria. Her beautiful hands were folded in front of her shiny black dress. She stood still as a piece of porcelain as she answered "Yes?"

"I suppose you're my mother-in-law," George Redlake began again. "We don't happen to have met before."

"No."

This was really extremely awkward. It almost looked as though the fame of his book had not reached Thorpe Folville. To stand up like this, just as if he were at Balmoral! Preposterous! George clutched at an inspiration.

"Won't you sit down?" he inquired with a gallant solicitude.

Mrs. Weston acknowledged the suggestion with a faint inclination of her cap, but remained standing. At that very moment Aunt Margaret's obbligato stopped suddenly in the middle of a phrase. The effect of sudden silence was disconcerting.

"In any case," George Redlake went on, "I imagine you can guess why I've come here?" Apparently Mrs. Weston couldn't. For lack of a reply he continued: "Some weeks ago your daughter, my wife, came here. Rather suddenly. We had a slight misunderstanding. I want to see her. Perhaps you'll be good enough to tell her so?"

Jim's grandmother shook her head. The gesture was dispassionate.

"My dear madam, that's quite ridiculous. Elizabeth may be your daughter; but I venture to remind you that she's also my wife. If she's here I have a right to see her, and I've every intention of asserting it."

"She is *not* here," said Mrs. Weston. This time she was unable to suppress her satisfaction in the dramatic announcement. George found that encouraging.

"You mean that she's out? When do you expect her to come in again?"

"I don't expect her. She left Thorpe Folville a month ago."

"A month ago? This is very surprising." Mrs. Weston smiled faintly; if she had really been china George would have smashed her. "Please tell me. Where is she?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Is that the truth?"

"Mr. Redlake!"

"I'm sorry." It wouldn't work out a bit like this in the book. "Supposing you don't know, I gather you won't help me to find her?"

"Most certainly not."

"Did she bring the boy here with her?"

"Yes."

"And take him away with her?"

"No."

"I'm glad to hear that." He was. He had a feeling, although it was he who asked questions and she who answered them, that he was the man in the dock and she on the bench. Now, at last he had something definite to go on. "In that case," he continued with an attempt at blandness, "I shall be glad if you will send for him. I'll take him back with me."

Again Mrs. Weston shook her head.

"But this, my dear lady, is fantastic. If the boy's here you have no conceivable right to keep him away from me. Please realise I mean what I say. If you refuse me, I must see some responsible person. Your husband, for instance."

"Mr. Redlake, *I* am responsible." She said it superbly. "If you want to attach responsibility to anyone, please attach it to me."

"The law," George began. . . .

"Oh, yes, I know all about that. Please don't trouble to tell me."

"If I went to a magistrate . . ."

"My husband is one," Mrs. Weston suggested helpfully.

"Then am I to understand . . ." George hesitated.

"Yes, I think you'd much better."

The woman was awful. It must be from her that Elizabeth got her obstinacy. He might talk for an hour like this and get no further. And already the light was falling. In that dark room her imperturbable face shone out with an icy pallor which chilled the outburst that formed itself in his hot mind. Each sentence was frostily nipped as it came to his lips. He knew the frustrations he had known when dialogue dried up in a book. In a book people said, more or less, what you wanted them to say, but this damned woman broke all the rules. He felt himself becoming pathetic—here alone in this ghastly room with this ghastly woman at sunset in a God-forsaken village miles away from anywhere! The door opened, and in came a maid shaped just like a monkey who began to hop about the room laying the table for supper. Her presence had no effect whatever on Mrs. Weston, but it made George realize suddenly how hungry he was.

"I suppose," he heard himself saying, "there's an inn in the village."

"There are two," Mrs. Weston replied, "neither of them comfortable."

"Then I suppose," he answered, clutching at the chance of escape, "I suppose I had better be getting back to Melton Mowbray. My cab is waiting."

Mrs. Weston inclined her head with the politest insolence. "You may go to Hell," she seemed to be saying, "as far as I am concerned."

"Pardon!" said the marmoset, skipping round George Redlake's legs to fetch a decanter.

"Eliza," said Mrs. Weston, "will you see this gentleman to the door?"

"Yes, ma'am."

And the wonder of it was that George Redlake, that master of mordant dialogue, obediently followed her. "I shall come back and have a talk about this with Dr. Weston to-morrow morning," he warned his mother-in-law; but even as he spoke he had in his bones a feeling that he wouldn't do anything of the sort. It was hardly worth while constructing another heroic scene with the prospect of seeing it slip into an anticlimax of this kind. After all, he reflected, as he drove back through the dusk to Melton, I have done what I set out to do, I've asserted my personal dignity and refrained from losing my temper under the strongest provocation. Later, thanks to a tolerable bottle of Burgundy, the matter looked even rosier. By that visit to Thorpe, however unsuccessful it might appear on the surface, he had satisfied the scruples of an extremely delicate conscience; he had gone out of his way—to the extent of two hundred miles and two full working days—to offer forgiveness and a share in his new good fortune to the woman who had wronged him, and she, by her mother's proxy, had rejected these favours. Supposing he had found her at Thorpe and that she had consented to return to Sedgebury, bringing with her the old exasperations and the old burdens. How happily different was his present case—alone in the world with his success, a sense of stern duty performed and a bottle of Pommard, and free: he was actually free for the first time in thirteen years! As he sat there, smiling, he wondered if this excellent pub could rise to a drinkable cognac. It could. Reconstructing the scene at Thorpe through its golden haze George Redlake perceived that he had managed that interview with superhuman subtlety. That amazing old lady, whose image had already ousted that of Mrs. Mudd as a typical detestable female for his next novel, had fluttered like a stupid quail into the net which his skill had spread for her. To have demanded Jim's person was a stroke of sheer genius. Did she really imagine, poor simple soul, that he cared twopence for the brat? Let them keep him, and welcome! Did she think for one moment that he, George Redlake, intended to waste time and money by driving out to Thorpe Folville and persisting in an unseemly dispute over the body of a child whom he didn't want in the least? No doubt, at this moment, she and her husband—a shadowy character whom George hadn't yet taken the trouble to define—were sitting with their heads together in the lamplight over the mahogany table working out a plan of campaign. Let them do it . . . let them worry their brains out! All for nothing! Such torments were the penalty that bourgeois minds (just like Elizabeth's) paid for their inability to understand the artistic temperament. To-morrow, he decided with the last sip of Courvoisier, to-morrow I shall begin my new book—and to Hell with the lot of them!

VII. *Midsummer Days*

APART from the heroic part which he imagined he had played in it, George Redlake's roseate version of the Thorpe Folville interview was correct. Mrs. Weston had never been particularly drawn to Jim; his presence reminded her of a discreditable connection which she preferred to forget; she had accepted the charge of him as a concession in return for his mother's removing herself and her threat of divorce; it was a temporary arrangement, made without prejudice, acceptable, principally, because it amused the doctor and left her free to do what she liked with Margaret.

At the moment when she encountered George Redlake Mrs. Weston hadn't had the smallest intention of fighting for Jim. It was only when she beheld in the flesh the monster whose marriage with Elizabeth had embarrassed her that Jim's grandmother saw red. That she, Jane Weston, should be questioned by this insolent writing fellow! That he should presume to ask her to sit down in her own dining-room and order her to produce her grandchild as if she were a servant! Her refusal to do so had been entirely uncalculated. It wasn't often that she acted on an impulse, but when she did her pride would never allow her to go back on it. So it came about that an anger exactly comparable to that which had made her disown his mother now forced her to the opposite extreme of adopting Jim.

The consciousness of a crushing victory, which she shared with George Redlake, atoned for the inconvenient results of her pride. Mrs. Weston never did things by halves, and when once she had decided to make the boy her property no power on earth could loosen him from her clutches. As George Redlake left her standing in the dining-room with her pale hands still clasped on the stomach of her satin bodice, her cold little heart was hardened to fight for Jim to the bitterest end.

"That man said he would come here again to-morrow morning," she told the doctor. "If he does, John, I think it better that *I* should see him. In any case, if he interviews you, I insist on being present. And I think that Jim should be kept well out of the way."

"That sounds rather unnecessary," said the doctor. "What does the fellow look like?"

"Exactly what you would imagine," Mrs. Weston replied. "And he speaks like a gentleman: that is the danger nowadays," she added darkly.

Just where that danger lay she didn't explain, and Dr. Weston left it at that. He hated rows in all matters except those which involved life and death in his own profession.

Moreover, he felt no strong personal desire to tackle George Redlake; even though Elizabeth couldn't get on with the fellow, no outsider was in a position to apportion the blame, and if Jane had been in form, he knew that George Redlake, innocent or guilty, must have got all and more than his deserts, while he couldn't help respecting his grim little wife's vindictive strength—with the kind of pride its owner might feel in the pluck of a terrier that has drawn a badger. If she had really resolved to keep Jim, so much the easier. He had long since decided that in matters of family policy there were only two alternatives: complete compliance with her will, or a domestic hell to which his amiable nature was quite unfitted. If anyone had to see George Redlake again, he would leave it to her. As for getting Jim out of the way: this proposal opened up a subject that had been in his mind for some time.

"If we're really going to keep the boy," he said—and he spoke as though Jim were a young retriever on trial—"it's time he was getting some sort of an education. Elizabeth has tried her hand at it, he tells me; but the results, though he's sharp enough, are scrappy, to say the least of it. What he needs, of course, is 'grounding.'"

The look that spelt "money" came into Mrs. Weston's eyes.

"He can share Miss Minnet with Lucy," she suggested.

"No, no; he's had too much of women already. I want him to be manly. It seems to me that Malthus will be just right for him. With Malthus's boys he'll get some of the baby knocked out of him. And Malthus is pretty sound; he has to be. If his boys don't get scholarships he'll never be able to educate them. Besides, he's a decent fellow, and I'd like to help him. God knows how the poor chap manages. Every little will help."

"Well, as long as you don't go making extravagant offers . . ." Mrs. Weston began.

"Leave that to me, my girl," said the doctor.

And for once she did—with the result that next morning, when the decks were all cleared for action with George Redlake who didn't arrive, being engaged at the time in making virulent notes on his mother-in-law's nature and appearance for the new novel, Jim's grandfather drove him over the field road to Cold Orton, where his first serious schooling began in the Spartan surroundings of Mr. Malthus's vicarage. And nobody at Thorpe Folville minded, except Miss Minnet, who had hoped for the privilege of teaching her dear Elizabeth's boy, and Lucy, who not only lost a playfellow but also her partner in the struggle against Aunt Margaret. "She'll sing me to death if you're not here, Jim," she said.

So, every day except Saturday, when Mr. Malthus wrestled with his God in the writing of sermons, and Sundays, when, peering through his concave spectacles, he read the result from the pulpit, the tall yellow dogcart transported Jim to Cold Orton and fetched him away after tea. That was the saddest part of it. Mrs. Malthus's teas were so scanty compared with his grandmother's, and the three Malthus boys, Paul, Mark and Christopher—to say nothing of the four little girls, Cecilia, Catherine, Bridget and Agnes—so skilled in the technique of voracity that when Mrs. Malthus flung them their tea Jim felt like a terrier on a lead at the moment when hounds are breaking up a fox. For though Mr. Malthus clung to the literal truth of the Book of Genesis and regarded Darwin as Antichrist, the schoolroom at Cold Orton presented a classical example of the survival of the fittest.

Never had a village been more appropriately named. It lay perched on the last wave-crest of that rolling country, wilfully exposed to the East wind which drove in from the North Sea, sweeping the one long street until it resembled the clean, cold stony interior of Mr. Malthus's mind. The schoolroom itself faced north and east, the southern side of the house being protected from any possible rays of sunlight by the shadow of an immense monkey-puzzle tree, a spiny monster of which Mr. Malthus was inordinately proud. He was rigidly Franciscan in everything but the length of his family—even that seemed the result of a compliance with the laws of God rather than of the natural indulgence of man—and, once having begotten them, conceived it his duty to protect them from the demoralizing influences of any physical comfort by a routine of icy baths, unappetizing food, and hours of futile, inky travail in pursuit of scholarships.

Even in the height of summer the white light creeping between the mullions of uncurtained windows gave the schoolroom at Cold Orton a wintry look that accorded with the pinched, frozen aspect of Mr. Malthus's features and his thin, bloodless fingers turning the pages of the Bible with which Jim's school hours began, continued and ended in an atmosphere that smelt, ever so faintly, of stone-flagged passages, bread-and-butter and lavatories.

Yet, in spite of the barbarity of his fellow-pupils, which showed itself as soon as their father's back was turned as a natural result of his repressions, Jim couldn't help enjoying those days at Cold Orton. The very roughness and vigour of these hard-pruned saplings excited his natural timidity to emulation. As the doctor had said, he had been brought under the regiment of women, encountering no violence but his father's verbal rapier-thrusts; and the physical rough-and-tumble in which he now had to hold his own or go under gave him confidence to resent Aunt Margaret's patronage and Lucy's prim superiority. After all, they were only females, deserving the scorn that the Malthus boys gave to their sisters.

In addition to this, he really liked Mr. Malthus—principally because his male severity was tempered by genuine justice; even more, in all probability, because Mr. Malthus liked him.

The vicar was a born schoolmaster, and Jim, thanks to the adult atmosphere to which his loneliness had condemned him, much less of a child intellectually than the Malthus brood, shooting forth little gleams of unschooled knowledge and intelligence above the dull horizons of routine within which the others laboured so inkily; and though the yahoos considered these exhibitions "sidey" and took it out of Jim accordingly, their father welcomed them as oases in the dry wastes of primary education. At the moment Mrs. Malthus's fatal beauty had smitten him Mr. Malthus had looked to being elected a Fellow of his college; his own unregretted lost paradise was a Cambridge high table where mellow if slovenly gentlemen of his own age drank port and capped Latin quotations in strict moderation until a fat living, like Mr. Jewell's, fell plop into their laps like a ripe pear. For himself the highest realizable ambition was a rural deanery or preferment to some living worth more than three hundred a year; but in Jim's promise, directed by him, he tasted, vicariously, the fruit of an academic distinction which heredity had spitefully denied to his own offspring. He rose to the boy's intelligence with an enthusiasm that made his eyes glisten behind their concave lenses, and atoned to Jim for the scornful jealousy with which the others regarded him.

And, beyond all this, Mr. Malthus was a good man—narrow, uncompromising, arid, yet really good. Neither Mr. Holly, in his cultured elegance, nor Mr. Jewell with his social prerogatives, could compete with that essential quality which, like a clear candle-flame, transilluminated their colleague's mean figure. Mr. Holly might win prizes at flower-shows and enrapture the ladies with Chesterton's latest over the cake at a "county" luncheon table; Mr. Jewell, at a garden-party, might loudly address Lord Essendine as Essendine without the Lord; but Mr. Malthus, in addition to educating Jim and his own children and without the advantage of Mr. Holly's lady-like governess-cart or Mr. Jewell's grey hunter, knew the inside of every cottage and farm in his parish from end to end, and the inside of more hearts than anyone but Doctor Weston had ever entered. His own heart, indeed, resembled his own parish church: a humble, cool little building, lighted by narrow lancets, austere and clean-swept, yet always curiously sweet-smelling—not with memories of the incense in which Mr. Holly delighted, nor the close, crypt-like odours imprisoned for six days out of seven by Mr. Jewell at Thorpe, but with the fine, pure air of the open countryside to which the flowers that Mrs. Malthus piously kept in the altar-vases added a gentle fragrance. And the door of the church at Cold Orton was always open.

Jim liked Mrs. Malthus too, in spite of her unfortunate shortcomings in the matter of food.

She was a frail woman, almost too transparent, one would have said, to have been capable of producing anything so solid as that romping family. In matters of behaviour and belief she was even narrower than her husband; her compressed lips and wary eyes made her always look as though she were on the point of being shocked, as, indeed, she usually was. But this general narrowness was compensated by an astonishing breadth in one direction: a maternal instinct unsensual and so wide that it embraced indiscriminately not only her husband and the seven assorted pledges of his affection, but the entire child-life of Cold Orton, Jim included. No child could exist within reach of her without her wanting to mother it.

This attitude was not sentimental; indeed it implied a certain severity toward its objects. She was much less indulgent, Jim found, than his mother, or even his grandmother; yet always, behind her severity, he couldn't help being conscious of an inward glow, a radiation so pleasant that he couldn't resent her even when she made him do silly, unnecessary things, like changing wet stockings or using a handkerchief. What was more, in spite of their hardness as individuals, he was forced to admire the gentleness with which the Malthuses behaved to one another—so different from the married relationship of his own parents or grandparents. Jim had never before seen a married couple who were completely united in their interests and therefore completely happy. The quality of the interests in which they were united made no difference to the strange effect, which filled him with awe.

But, if compensations were needed, the circumstance that gave a really magical quality to Jim's schooling at Cold Orton was the fact that, after a little while, he rode there on the pony which he and his mother had seen kicking up its heels in the paddock on his first day at Thorpe. Dr. Weston had been eager from the first to initiate his grandson and heir in his own ruling passion. The pony's name was Victoria, generally shortened to Vic. She was a small, stocky creature of Welsh blood with a docked tail and a crop like a boot-brush, very shiny and black, with a back that sagged like a cheap wire mattress. It was Ernest who taught Jim to ride (his grandfather was always too busy) and not only to ride but to attend to the minutest detail of Vic's toilet, food and appearance: to clean out her bedding and hay-up before breakfast; to pick out her feet between frog and shoe; to scrub her belly and loins and jowl with a straw wisp and appropriate noises; to feed her last thing at night with "meadowy" hay (Don't you never be put off with rank marshy stuff, Master Jim) or perhaps, after strenuous days, a sweet-smelling mash of the flaky bran that came from the mill at Essendine.

After one or two tosses, which Ernest said would be the making of him, Jim soon found his seat, and the leading-rein was abandoned. "He's been born with a pair of hands, sir," Ernest told the doctor; and his grandfather grunted, as he always did when he was satisfied, and Jim was made free of a rare new element—neither earth nor air, but somewhere ecstatically between.

"We'll have you out with the hounds come cubbing-time," Ernest told him; and this splendid ambition became the main-spring that moved his life, which, from that moment onward, not only centred round Vic but actually smelt of her, much to the annoyance of Lucy, whom the pony had robbed of her only companion.

"I wonder you don't take Vic to bed with you," she said contemptuously. Jim wished that he could. It was lovely, first thing in the morning, to run down to the stable, to see that bright luminous eye, stroke that velvet muzzle, to feel soft lips nuzzle the flat palm for the lump of sugar he had sneaked from Aunt Margaret's tea-tray. And then, after breakfast, to go jogging down the street, with Vic's feed in a bag at the saddle, feeling awfully grown-up and grand as he pulled aside to allow the long, clattering strings of hunters to pass, two by two, with the grooms cracking jokes on their backs. . . . And then the grand canter that broke to a gallop over the fields to Cold Orton, with a drain to jump here and there—like the Twyford Brook in miniature—and six gates to unfasten and close . . . to say nothing of the hungry envy of the Malthus boys and the awe of their sisters!

So the summer passed, with many dim joys and excitements embroidering the central fact of Jim's existence, which was Vic. It passed in an August orgy of county garden-parties—tolerable, in spite of Sunday clothes, if he was allowed to ride to them—at which his Aunt Margaret bloomed like a Chinese peony; in picnics, a clerical form of diversion, where Mr. Holly handed round rock-cakes and bravely fanned wasps off the ladies; in the cricket match between Thorpe and Cold Orton, at which Mr. Jewell and Mr. Malthus each made a duck, when Joe Atkins, the blacksmith, going in last, hit a six that sank into Lady Ernestine's bosom, but didn't hurt her, she said, because of her stays; in tennis parties, at various rectories and vicarages, where Mr. Jewell wore an Eton blazer much too small for him and shouted "Yours, partner!" whenever he missed a stroke; in one great political "do" at the Castle, to which no children were invited, when he and Lucy climbed up to his mother's playground at the top of the field and heard the band appropriately play "I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls" to the barons and serfs assembled, but all they could see was a mass of people crawling like ants round the edge of a white and red marquee striped like an aniseed ball; in two special tea-parties at Rose Cottage, when Miss Minnet told him and Lucy voiceless, pointless stories about their two mothers' childhood, and Jim, in a little lean-to greenhouse smelling of musk, discovered a limp sulphur-moth, and smashed a pane in catching it; in idle moments spent at Joe Atkins' forge, where time slipped away in a smell of frizzling hoofs, and the bellows sighed and sparks flew, as hammers rang and tinkled on Joe's anvil; until, all of a sudden, these summer delights came to an end, as though Jackie Frost (as Ernest called him) had nipped them, and the whole countryside settled down to the serious business of life—in other words, the hunting season began.

VIII. *Cold Orton Gate*

FROM that moment nobody at Thorpe Folville thought or talked of anything else. Mrs. Weston, in particular, sat like a student of astronomy, anxiously awaiting the appearance of those heavenly bodies whose movement in the direction of the Shires had been hinted or definitely announced, with two enormous red textbooks, *Debrett's Peerage*, and *Burke's Landed Gentry*, at her elbow. These volumes were merely needed to refresh her memory; she prided herself on knowing the august or shameful connections of all the local nobility by heart: but whenever any of the hunting-boxes in the neighbourhood found a new tenant, as the district "filled up," she conceived it her duty to be prepared with a complete knowledge of their tenants' lineage and connections—not only because this subject was her own special province, but because one never knew at what moment questions of precedence might arise.

To this end she put Aunt Margaret, who regarded the social influx as a hungry young peregrine might regard a flock of migrating quails, through a stiff "refresher course" of instruction. Supposing, for instance, her luncheon-table were to be honoured simultaneously by Lady Essendine and the Lady Juliet Cowen, whose husband had taken Rossington Hall: which of these ladies should sit at the doctor's right hand? Lady Essendine, of course, said Margaret. But not a bit of it! For Lady Essendine, though daughter of a duke, took her husband's rank, and Lady Juliet, as wife of a commoner, kept her out.

"It's all very simple," frowned the doctor, who also found it boring.

"No, John, it is *not* simple," said Mrs. Weston superbly, as though it were a matter of personal satisfaction to her to know that it wasn't; and she went on to explain how Lady Juliet, a duke's younger daughter, actually preceded the wife of her own elder brother, Lord Henry Mortimer, and how Lady Essendine, whose husband was an earl, also had the honour of preceding Lady Henry because a countess was before the wife of a duke's younger son.

Those two fat red volumes, whose gothic binding gave them an heraldic appearance, occupied, in the Weston household, the place which the Bible filled at Cold Orton Vicarage. They were the only books that ever left the library bookshelves until, as the days drew in, Jim discovered a set of Dickens, dark green, with illustrations by Phiz and Cruikshank, and, even more thrilling, by reason of their subject, the complete works of Whyte Melville—whom his grandfather had actually known in the flesh, and whose book, *Market Harborough*, read and re-read, became almost as sacred to him as was Debrett to his grandmother. The fact that Lucy couldn't share his enthusiasm for Melville's hunting stories, preferring tame historical romances like *Sister Louise*, filled Jim with contempt for a nature and intellect that did not respond to the heroic in literature.

In the middle of October these visionary delights materialized. On a morning of mellow gold with a touch of ground-frost Jim rode with his grandfather to the opening meet of the Thorpe at Cold Orton gate. From the scene of the meet he could see the stone gable of the Vicarage and the top of the monkey-puzzle tree that shadowed the schoolroom where the envious Malthuses were learning the Collect for the Twenty-third Sunday after Trinity. Rich though it was, his consciousness of their inky servitude made the moment sweeter. As they jogged up to the meet together, ten minutes before time, the pony straining to keep up with the easy gait of his grandfather's roan, Jim's heart beat a wild cross-rhythm to Victoria's short paces. Through the night before his fancies had ridden him so hard that he scarcely slept a wink, imagining himself taking terrific bullfinches or floundering in a brook, while behind all these visions he heard the voice of Ernest, whose final admonitions had been solemnly delivered in the dark stables that evening:

"If you sees any horse with a red ribbon on his tail, you keep clear of him: he's a kicker. . . . Don't you think you can follow the old roan, Master Jim, or you'll soon be in Queer Street . . . just you leave it to Vic; she's a sight more knowledgeable than you are. . . . When you come to a plough, mind you, ride up the furrow, not acrost it. . . . If you sees a line of pollards, that means water;

go steady! If hounds goes over, you can; if they doesn't, you can't; but mind you pull together twenty yards short of it . . ."

These maxims and a score of others, kept him company as, terribly conscious of his tight new breeches, he moved up to the fringe of that assemblage of shining vehicles, pink coats, white buckskin, sleek horseflesh and dappled hounds, all glorious in the mist-tempered mellow air against the grey stone and flaming beech-clumps of Cold Orton.

Doctor Weston, though one of the oldest members of the hunt, did not wear pink; yet nobody seemed more appropriate to his surroundings than that trim, precise figure in his iron-grey cords and square-topped felt hat. How popular he was could be judged from the number of gorgeously apparelled horsemen who smiled and waved their crops in salutation, or sidled up to exchange a word with him. Jim listened to all of them, recognizing from the forms in which Doctor Weston replied to them various members of that celestial host whose names ornamented his grandmother's conversation. It shocked him to find so little correspondence between themselves and their names. Lord Essendine, for instance, whom Jim had always imagined with square whiskers and wearing a coronet, was extraordinarily like Ernest in complexion and features, though somewhat older; while Lord Clun, who was a Knight of the Garter, looked far less impressive than Mr. Cowen, Lady Juliet's husband. None of them took the least notice of Victor himself; so Jim, feeling very shy in spite of his excitement, slipped away from his grandfather's side to the place where the family dogcart, with Aunt Margaret, highly flushed, on the box beside Mrs. Weston, and Lucy, quietly devouring the scene from behind, stood wedged between Mr. Holly's governess-cart and a great yellow drag from Barleythorpe. That morning Jim's grandmother was superb. Enthroned among the stars she sat rigidly upright, inclining her head with such dignity and so frequently that she seemed like a queen distributing favours.

"Why, here's Jim!" cried Aunt Margaret, suddenly aware of his approach.

"Wait one moment, Margaret," said Mrs. Weston irritably, "I haven't yet caught Lady Ernestine's eye."

"She's over there, mother."

"I know she's over there. Wait . . ."

And they waited, rapt, until suddenly a huge smile of recognition divided Lady Ernestine's homely face, beneath her black veil, and she moved over toward them, the motion of her vast, tight-habited haunches duplicating that of her mount's quarters.

"Good morning, everybody," she said. "Not out to-day, Miss Weston?"

It was the question, Margaret explained at some length, of a new riding-habit which hadn't arrived in time. Such a bore! The Melton tailors were so exasperating!

"If it were a matter of missing Cold Orton Gate, I'd come in my ——" and Lady Ernestine smacked her bulging hip, to show what she meant, so noisily that her big chestnut began to dance. "Stay quiet, damn you!" she told him; and then, dismissing Margaret's excuse and her scornful reply together, continued: "But I see Jim's out. What's the pony's name, Jim?"

Jim was so surprised at Lady Ernestine's addressing him by his own that he could scarcely find an answer. Apparently she didn't expect one, for she didn't wait: "I can see you're a terrible thruster, aren't you, Jim?" she said. "Now don't you go riding down my brother's hounds, or you'll have to pay for new sterns for 'em. Don't forget that!" And she pointed her little joke with a great loud laugh that made other people look round and smile in her direction.

"But if I were you, seriously, mind," she went on, as though Jim were the only important person present, "I should stick pretty close to Alec and Cynthia there. Jenkins is looking after them, and I'll tell him to keep an eye on you as well. Good-bye and good luck! A rippin' mornin'."

She wheeled round sharply and walked her horse to another group, two children, a boy and a girl, more or less of Jim's age, in the charge of a grizzled groom who touched his cap.

"Is that really Lord Folville and Lady Cynthia, mother?" said Margaret, who had watched the Amazon's departing figure with greedy eyes. "I should never have known them. *How* these children grow!"

Indeed it was difficult to believe that they were brother and sister. Alec Folville, Lord Essendine's heir, was a slim dark boy, with a round, Norman head and one of those skins that neither burn nor tan, preserving, in every climate, a uniform healthy pallor. As his aunt, Lady Ernestine, spoke to the groom and pointed with her crop, he turned his eyes in Jim's direction. They were certainly dark, rather prominent, like a bird's, and searchingly scornful—as scornful, Jim thought, as his mouth, Alec's sole inheritance of his mother's beauty, whose full lips were cast in a lovely, if somewhat sensual curve. Those eyes, which rested on Jim for a bare moment, seemed to sum up his person, his clothes and his mount, then turned contemptuously away.

His sister Cynthia was as fair as Alec was dark. Riding side-saddle in a black habit of perfect cut, her slender figure as erect as Mrs. Weston's, her blondness—unlike the coarse-skinned blondness of Aunt Margaret—shared the physical quality of her brother's darker type. Her hair, which hung in a long pigtail, was the colour of red wheat or honey that has heather in it, yet more lustrous than either; her brow, beneath the tilt of her hard hat, swept slightly backward, suggesting speed and impulsiveness rather than contemplation; the curve of her dark brows was swift as a swallow's wing. Her eyes were big—Jim could not see the colour of them; but her nose, though it was perhaps a thought too large, was chiselled with such delicate fineness as to seem in keeping with the lovely Mortimer mouth—in her case softer, more red and less scornful than in her brother's. In the sunlight of that morning the child glowed with a crystalline radiance hardly human, but rather that of some exquisite work of art.

When her eyes moved in Jim's direction they dwelt for even less time than her brother's on him, being concentrated immediately on his grandmother and Aunt Margaret, and even more on Lucy, whose appearance they seemed to devour with so acute an interest, as of one small female animal quizzing another, that Jim couldn't help examining Lucy too and making comparisons between them with a result that disconcerted and puzzled him. For while Lucy was pretty in her own brown, violet-eyed way, compared with Cynthia Folville she seemed positively hoydenish, her form indefinite, her colour dulled, her very softness a defect. The difference in the quality of their two bodies was so great, beneath that steady gaze Lucy seemed so pathetic, that Jim was suddenly swept into an instinctive attitude of defence and resentment against that proud Folville creature's insolent elegance. She must be, he thought, a beastly, conceited little thing, even worse than her brother. Anyway, he hated the two of them, and was certain that both were far too stuck-up to ride as well as he could.

He hadn't in any case, time to pursue this rancour. By this time the Master's ten minutes' grace were up. The hounds had finished their rolling, and moved away in a meek, expectant bunch in the direction of the first draw, Cold Orton Spinney. Jim's grandfather touched his shoulder:

"Come along, young man!" And a moment later he found himself dwarfed in a dense cavalcade of tall big-boned horses trampling the wide grass border of the road with a muffled sound against the autumnal silence.

"As soon as he's halloaed away, Jim," Dr. Weston was saying, "you'd better make tracks for home. The odds are he'll go downwind to Rossington Gorse. That's a fast line of country over which you won't have a chance, and I'd rather you didn't break your neck on your first day out. I've quite enough work on hand as it is," he laughed, good-humouredly. Indeed the doctor was just like a boy out of school that morning, with his blue eyes sparkling above his snowy whiskers—far nearer to himself, Jim felt, than his new aversion Alec Folville, who, riding just ahead with his sister and the groom, seemed, by the very aspect of his back, to be treating the whole adventure with a contemptuous lack of enthusiasm.

Along the edge of the spinney the compact field scattered and resolved itself into many expectant groups and units. For so large a concourse it seemed strangely silent, so quiet that when a woodpigeon emerged from the high trees with a sudden clap of wings, Jim was quite startled. A gust of wind stirred through the wood; it blew towards them carrying with it a dank air laden with the smell of dead leaves, new and old, that smell of covert-sides which fox-hunters remember over all the world. Then, out of the heart of the spinney, came the quavering, melancholy note of a horn. What were they doing in there among the old leaves and the trailing brambles? Jim couldn't tell where they were; he could only wait and wait. Now they were surely coming nearer. He could hear a snapping of twigs, as though some great body went blundering on its way through the undergrowth, and the voice of a whip, blaspheming at the top of his lungs. Then, suddenly, through a gap in the hedge that enclosed the spinney, a single hound emerged. He threw back his head and sniffed, as though surprised to find himself in the open, then lowered it and burrowed in again, and again the horn wailed, sounding faint and distant now.

"Drawn blank," said the doctor. "Well, well, Jim . . ." But, even as he spoke, a gentle whimpering sound was heard in the spinney. Jim's pony shivered suddenly and pricked her ears. Then one deep baying note, full-throated, agonized. "That's Boardsman . . . good old warrior!" said the doctor; and then they crashed, so that the whole wood seemed to echo till it rocked with music. "Keep still, Jim!" For already Vic was beginning to dance with excitement, the whole field alive with restless movement, tremulous, fermenting, changing positions, jockeying for a start. And all the time that blood-maddening music nearer and nearer . . . intolerably near. . . . Then a cry that died down the wind: "Gone away . . . Gone away. . . . Gone aw-a-a-ay!" Dr. Weston had vanished, and Jim stood, almost dumbfounded, in a pelter of flying turf shed from hoofs thudding past him, clutching at his reins, till Vic thought "This is too stupid!" and nearly wrenched them out of his hands as she galloped for a gap where the honey-coloured pigtail of Cynthia Folville showed what ponies can do when they're put to it.

By the time that Jim reached the gap she was half a field in front, and the heads of Alec and the groom dipped down over a rise; by the time that he topped the same rise they had disappeared. Now he saw only, in the foreground, Cynthia's bobbing pigtail, and spattered red and black, on a green foreshortened field, the whole of the Thorpe hunt and white hounds streaking on ahead. By this time they seemed to be moving so slowly that Jim had hopes of catching up with them. Remembering Ernest's words, he gave the pony her head. It was a rare, exhilarating moment, beside which his gallops over the fields to Cold Orton seemed cold and tame. His blood sang in his ears as the air rushed past them. Vic ran like a pony gone mad; in another minute he would experience the extreme triumph of overtaking that odious, proud little girl. The line of a ragged hedge stretched in front of them; on the left, a gate stood half open.

If I cut across now, he thought, I'll get through it before her; but, even as he turned the pony's head, he saw that the child in front went on without swerving. Straight onward she rode, dead straight downwind, on the point for which the fox's mask was set. Of course she knows this line, Jim thought, there must be a gap; and he urged Vic forward madly, to make up for the time he had lost in turning toward the gate. Yes, there was a gap—he could see it now—a dip in the barrier of quickset spanned by old timber, a trifling jump for a hunter, but near the limit of what a pony could manage. She'll funk it at the last, he thought, grimly, hopefully. But she didn't; she went straight on, without check, as it seemed; then paused, and by Jove she was over! Well, now I suppose I'm in for it, he thought. He couldn't refuse a jump that a girl had taken. As he rode for the hedge the voice of Ernest came back to him:

"Ride slow at your fences and give the pony her head!" No mistake this time! Vic gathered herself, then jumped; Jim heard her hoof tap the timber as she topped it; she pecked as she landed; he snatched at the reins and was off, with the thud of the pony's fall confused in his own.

When he sat up again, shaken and somewhat humiliated, the dishevelled Vic was on her feet, observing him with reproachful eyes. At a little distance stood another pony in a similar attitude, and on the grass, in precisely the same position as himself, sat Cynthia Folville with a mocking smile of intense satisfaction on her lips and in her big blue eyes.

"Hello," she said. "You took a beast of a toss. I watched you."

"Well, so did you, anyway," said Jim indignantly. "I thought you were over." His first indignation had sounded so impolite that he felt it his duty to add: "I hope you're all right?"

"All right? Of course I am," she said scornfully. "I know how to fall. I landed much better than you did. I know, because I saw. I only stayed here," she added superbly, "to watch you."

"Oh, did you? Thanks very much," said Jim, regretting his politeness.

It was rather ridiculous, this scene: they two sitting there on the grass, the two ponies patiently waiting, and everyone else heaven knew how many miles away. But while Jim was still flushed and rumpled and somewhat giddy with his fall, his companion, crouched there with her hands clasping her knees, with no sign of anything unusual about her but a smear of red earth on her black habit, seemed completely composed, surveying his flustered person with a cool, irritating amusement.

"Are you feeling better now?" she asked. The question had such a flavour of calculated insolence that he didn't answer it.

"I thought you'd make for the gate," he said. "It was silly not to."

"Then why didn't you do it?" she asked.

"I saw you go over."

"That's *why* I went over," she said, with a cruel little laugh—cruel and enchanting at once: it was so light and silvery, with something of the fineness of her deep voice and the exquisite crisp articulation of her speech. "You see I made a book on it," she went on. "I bet myself evens in half crowns that I'd take a toss, and four to one on you taking one. So really, I owe myself ten bob. It was worth it anyway."

"What was worth it?"

"To see you come off. You came a reg'lar smeller."

"I think it was absolutely beastly of you," said Jim.

She laughed again. "You see, Aunt Ernestine had told us it was your first day out. I know who you are."

"And I know who *you* are," said Jim, as though this were a score.

"Oh, really?" The tone was contemptuous, as if not knowing who she was would be sheer ignorance. "Aunt Ernestine asked Jenkins to keep an eye on you. Of course he couldn't; you got off so slowly and Alec was miles ahead. So I thought I'd do it instead of him," she added mischievously.

"Well, I hope you enjoyed it," said Jim bitterly, rising to his feet. His left knee stiff felt and painful, and the leg was numb. He limped with dignity to the spot where Vic was standing and prepared to mount.

"Of course I did." Her voice came from over his shoulder. "You came off like a clown at a circus. What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to Rossington Gorse."

"Why, surely you don't imagine you'll ever catch up with them? They're miles beyond there by now; you'll never find them."

He didn't care where he went really as long as he could get away from Cynthia; but her air of superior knowledge impressed him, and he deferred to it. After all, he knew nothing about hunting compared with her.

"Well, what would you do?" he asked doubtfully.

"Go home, of course. That's what I'm going to do. If you like you can come with me," she added condescendingly, as she mounted her pony.

Jim thought "I'm hanged if I will!" but, at that very moment, she turned with a smile so brilliant and frank and lovely as to make him blind to the superior little beast that she was. "Race you!" she cried, and was off like an arrow diagonally, taking unfair advantage of his slowness in starting. In a moment he was galloping after her flying figure, forgetting his fall, her insolence, everything, in the rush of that fierce competition. On the flat, in spite of her bad start, Vic was actually gaining. He only hoped to heaven that Cynthia's mischief wouldn't challenge him to another fence. She didn't. At the opposite corner of the field she reined in and stood waiting by a gate for him to open it.

"Wasn't that ripping?" she cried, her blue eyes blazing like sapphires. On her lovely mouth there was not a trace of scorn now. "If it had been another hundred yards, I believe you'd have won!"

When he opened the gate she thanked him, and Jim glowed with pride. It seemed to him an awfully gallant and manly thing to be opening gates for a lady who, though she expected the service as a matter of course, acknowledged it so graciously. She knew that her mischievous delight in his fall had hurt his pride, and now tried to salve the wound by a display of that complete ease and naturalness, amounting to sheer virtuosity, which is the birthright only of those whose social status is so secure that no familiarity can possibly lessen it. All the Folvilles, from Lord Essendine downward, possessed this enchanting faculty, whether they were dealing with Mrs. Weston's admired "county," who simply didn't count with them, with the Melton tradespeople or with the men in their stables: a kind of divine good manners which was, in fact, an exquisite snobbishness arising, not, as simple people might suppose, from the fact that they forgot who they were, but because they always, instinctively and unconsciously, remembered it.

In Cynthia, at the age of fourteen, this charming talent was already developed, with the result that Jim's ride back to Thorpe that day was delightful and exciting. She didn't, like Lucy, lie in wait for his clumsiness and crow over it, despising him, apparently, just because he was a male; nor did she submit to him with the grudging humility that the Malthus girls had been taught to display to their stronger brothers. They were equals, those two, in a way that Jim had never quite experienced before—not even with his mother, whose power, however benevolently she might exercise it, still existed. And then, as he was forced to admit again and again almost with a gasp, she was so dreadfully pretty. Though it seemed like treachery to Lucy to admit that any girl was prettier than she was, he couldn't help doing so. Not in detail—for Lucy's eyes were richer in colour than Cynthia's and not nearly so bold; Lucy's nose, which was small and straight, fulfilled higher canons of beauty than the prominent, delicately imperious nose of Cynthia; Lucy's mouth was much softer, much sweeter, perhaps less capable of cruelty than hers. Yet Lucy's prettiness, in comparison with Cynthia's, seemed a little indistinct; its realisation didn't overwhelm you with the same, sudden, breath-taking shock; you could take it for granted . . . and you could never take Cynthia's for granted, although she most certainly took it for granted herself.

As they crossed the last field before their way debouched on the Rossington Road, Jim was wondering already when he would see her again.

"I say, shall you be out on Thursday at Rossington?" he asked.

The eagerness of the question pleased her: it denoted a conquest.

"No, I'm going to town with mother on Tuesday, and then on to Pau."

"My Aunt's just come back from Florence," said Jim, not to be outdone, and vaguely connecting the Po with the Arno.

"Your Aunt? Oh, Miss Weston . . . the one in the dog-cart this morning? Yes, I've heard about her." And she laughed, rather rudely Jim thought, dismissing Aunt Margaret. "We may come back for Christmas, though," she conceded.

"Then I don't suppose I shall see you till then," he said regretfully.

"No, I don't suppose you will. (Her tone seemed to add "Why should you?") I shall cut across the park to get home," she said, closing the subject, "and thank you very much for opening those gates, Jim. It *is* Jim, isn't it?"

And then, with a piercingly brilliant smile, she was gone.

When Jim reached home, his head buzzing with his somewhat ignominious exploits of the chase, but even more with the afterglow of this romantic encounter, he found his grandmother and Aunt Margaret knee-deep in a slough of aristocratic genealogy, Mrs. Weston being at pains to explain just how Lady Ernestine happened to be third cousin to the Marquess of Clun. They were alone; for Lucy, on her return from the meet, had been packed off to profit by Miss Minnet's aphonic instruction. Jim was glad on the whole that Lucy wasn't there; for he felt a little guilty of the comparisons he had been making in her disfavour, and suspected that the high colours of his adventures might fade in the light of her quiet gaze. As it was, he was able to make his fall a heroic incident, and mention his ride with Cynthia Folville quite casually as a matter of course.

"Cynthia, indeed!" said Aunt Margaret, "I hope you didn't call her that."

"I don't think I called her anything," he said; "but she called me Jim."

"She called *you* Jim? You must be mistaken. How could she possibly know your name?"

"I don't know," said Jim, though of course he knew perfectly well. "But she did, and what's more, Aunt Margaret, she knew all about you."

The implication of a compliment, which Jim was too wise to qualify, made Aunt Margaret purr, and even Mrs. Weston was so impressed that Jim was about to increase his prestige by embarking on a richly-imagined and entirely fictitious account of his intimate conversation with Cynthia when the sudden return of Lucy took the wind from his sails. He almost wished that he had kept the whole affair secret when Aunt Margaret, whom the very mention of the word Folville was sufficient to excite, pursued the subject in a tone of clumsy badinage that seemed to Jim in the worst of taste.

"What's all this about Lady Cynthia?" Lucy asked him that evening with quiet scorn.

"Nothing that would interest you," he answered. "She came off at a fence, and we rode home together."

"And now, I suppose, you imagine you're in love with her?"

"In love with her indeed!"

He had a right to be indignant. She was getting to be as bad as Aunt Margaret, with all this silly talk about being in love. These women, it seemed to him, had no other idea in their heads. Silly nonsense! As if he had time for soft things like that! Indeed, if it hadn't been for the sly, jealous digs which Lucy continued to give him and the arch suggestions of Aunt Margaret, who regarded all life in terms of a novelette, he would probably have forgotten his encounter with Cynthia completely except as an easy means of making Lucy wild. For now, in compliance with his grandfather's plan, he pursued a more manly destiny in which Lucy and Aunt Margaret happily had no part. Once a week, at the doctor's side, he went out with the Thorpe. He was on nodding terms with the huntsman, Joe Fern, and learning not only the lie of the country but the names of the hounds. In November he was "blooded," and so proud of the fact that but for the marmoset's insistence he would have gone to bed with the gore of the fox on his face. And an even sterner future awaited him.

"There's no reason," Mr. Malthus confided to the doctor, "why Jim shouldn't go up for a scholarship. He's a lazy young dog, but extremely intelligent. Much sharper than my boys are," he added regretfully.

Mrs. Weston received the proposal coldly. "Well, what does that mean?"

"A hundred—anything up to a hundred and fifty: more than half of the school fees."

"His father must be making a mint of money nowadays," she answered grimly.

"Do you want to be beholden to Redlake?" he asked.

"No, I don't," she said. "Of course he's no right to expect it."

"It's no use spoiling the ship," the doctor suggested. "Malthus mentioned Winchester."

So the hunting of the fox over green pastures was suspended, and the hunting of square roots, through black morasses of figures, began.

BOOK TWO

YOUNG FOLKS

I. *Manners Makyth . . .*

WHEN Jim came back to Thorpe Folville at the end of his first term at Winchester, he had learnt what the marmoset meant when she said: "Oh, you rude boy!" He had discovered a number of other things: notably the fact of his own complete insignificance, which his position as the one young male in a house full of women and the apple of his grandfather's eye had tempted him to forget, and the importance of George Redlake, whose books, being much respected in academic circles, apparently constituted his sole claim to the notice of the "dons." The discovery of his father's fame astonished Jim. Although George Redlake's name was rarely mentioned at Thorpe Folville, it never cropped up without producing symptoms of a bridling discomfort in his grandmother's eyes and a shocked pain in Aunt Margaret's which made him ashamed of it.

At Thorpe he felt proud to be described as John Weston's grandson. At Winchester, nobody had ever heard Dr. Weston's name, while that of his despised father invariably produced a flattering impression. This readjustment of values in the matter of his parentage was typical of a hundred others. The things on which he most prided himself—as, for instance, his possession of the pony Vic, and a natural intelligence which had made the Malthus boys look dull—the qualities and endowments, in short, which contributed to his conceit in being superior to other boys of his own age, were now regarded as trifles if not as positive defects. His ambition to excel and to be "different" was soon replaced by a feverish and successful desire to conform to the conventions immutably established by William of Wykeham in the year Thirteen hundred and eighty seven, to submerge himself in a uniformity of speech, bearing, conduct, interest and loyalties with the dullest as well as the cleverest of his companions.

Not even in his holidays at Thorpe was this strict code permitted to be relaxed. His surrender of all personal pride, in fact, became a matter of pride in itself, and a source of such self-satisfaction that

Lucy, who, being a girl, had no sense of reverence or proportion, declared him to be abominably stuck-up, until, by sheer consistency, he overawed her into swallowing the Wykehamist convention whole, and becoming so skilled in its terminology that she no longer froze his blood, as Aunt Margaret did, by using the wrong word for everything without a twinge of shame.

The doctor's attitude to Jim's moulding by the scholastic machine was characteristic. While he held no brief for the public-schools and had never, as it happened, been to one himself, he was prepared to admit their efficacy in turning out the type of man he knew and liked in the hunting-field. The precise quality of discipline to which Jim was bound didn't matter two straws to him; the creed of politics or religion or manners which Jim acquired as a boy seemed unimportant, provided he emerged from the process with the sense of human decency and responsibility which he himself recognized in such diverse persons as Mr. Malthus and Lord Essendine, and equipped for the handling of the considerable possessions which he would inherit.

The only doubtful element in Jim's nature had been his possible share of George Redlake's temperament, and this, as the school years passed, seemed negligible. The doctor was not unimpressed by George Redlake's success, which irritated Mrs. Weston far more than his previous failure. On the contrary, he was eager that Jim should benefit from any credit that his father's fame could give him. But George Redlake, obscure or famous, seemed to him a man unprepared to admit any standards or obligations; a fragment of grit in the machinery of evolution, the supreme power in which, undogmatically, he believed; while Jim, as it seemed, was becoming an obedient unit in the secular and well-oiled life of Winchester. If Jim chose to strike out for himself later, that was his own affair; in the meantime the boy was becoming the kind of companion he had lacked and desired, in whose eager intelligence, as in a mirror, he could recognize the dreams, aspirations and discouragements of his own so different youth, unselfishly putting the fruits of his own experience at Jim's disposal.

In spite of the difference in their ages they were good companions; the doctor, for all his experience of dusty humanity, had the spirit of a boy with a boy's zest for physical enjoyments. This won Jim's heart, and though, in their holiday rides and drives together, the old man treated life as a game and their world as a playground, his wisdom was wary in displaying that world with its conventions of religion and conduct, its injustices and empty pretensions, in a faintly ironical spirit of comedy that suggested a different—yet not necessarily quite incompatible—scheme of values from that which his grandson absorbed at Winchester, where manners counted most, or was taught to revere by his grandmother, whose prophet was Mr. Jewell, her New Jerusalem Thorpe Castle, and her Bible Debrett.

Mrs. Weston's conception of Jim's education was, naturally, different from the doctor's. Until he won his scholarship she had boggled at the Winchester fees as a possible drain on the sums she had saved for Margaret; but when once that threat was removed and Jim began educating himself she approved of him, for the first time, as a social investment. Though she still spited herself by renouncing the privilege of making capital out of George Redlake's success, she did not hesitate to profit by Jim's. She found a rich satisfaction in referring to him as "our boy at Winchester" because, speaking socially—and no other aspect really concerned her—Winchester was just right: not showy, and therefore attractive to hordes of the newly-rich, like Eton; not suburban, like Harrow, nor yet, like Rugby, provincial.

Affecting to ignore the fact that he himself (or possibly Mr. Malthus) had made the scholarship possible, she enlarged on the advantages Jim had gained by her letting him get one, and especially on his opportunities of making friends among the "right sort of people." It was a pity, she felt, that Lord Essendine, himself a Wykehamist, had been seduced by his wife into following the Mortimer tradition and sending Alec to Eton; for if Alec had been at Winchester, he and Jim would certainly have become friends, and with Jim so established at the Castle, she herself—and particularly Margaret—would be able to approach that sublime edifice without the aid and embassy of Mrs. Jewell.

Fortunately, during that period, Mrs. Jewell's brilliance had been somewhat diminished by the fact that Lord Essendine, as a reward for his political services, had been made a Viceroy, with the result that Thorpe Castle was lying in state, inhabited only by family portraits, still visible on Thursdays and haughtily regarding a wilderness of dust-sheets resembling the shrouds of their noble originals. When Lady Essendine returned to England she preferred not to be buried along with them in the country, and established herself with the children at the Folville town-house in Grosvenor Square in an orbit beyond the range of Mrs. Weston's astronomical observations.

In the meantime Jim's grandmother directed her telescope on that part of the heavens visible from Winchester, directing his attention to several planetary satellites which her zeal had discovered and notably to the son and heir of Lady Juliet Cowen, whom unconquerable law had actually directed into Jim's own house. Unfortunately, in spite of his sparkling position in Debrett, young Cowen's light was dimmed at Winchester by the fact that his paternal strain was what students of heredity call a "dominant," the Semitic taking vengeance on the crusading blood in a nose that was definitely anything but Norman. In spite of his grandmother's persuasions Jim didn't take to him, eventually choosing as his principal friend a boy of his own age named Julian Hinton, for whose name and origins Mrs. Weston ransacked her books in vain.

This friendship, the last and closest of those which Jim made at Winchester, he owed to his father. "Are you any relation to George Redlake?" was the first question Julian asked him, and Jim had glowed with pride when he answered "Yes"; for Julian Hinton was already a figure at Winchester, which, in itself, was something of an achievement in a school where to be anything out of the ordinary was regarded as a lapse in good taste. He was a tall, slim boy, with jet-black hair and features of a fineness and delicacy almost feminine. His dark eyes, burning beneath long lashes and brows like a brush-stroke of Indian ink, the ivory smoothness of his cheeks and the bold line of his slightly undershot jaw, gave him the aspect of a lovely, petulant, imperious girl. Yet, apart from his face, there was nothing girlish about him. Not only was his by far the most brilliant intelligence of Jim's time, out-distancing Jim as easily as Jim had out-distanced the Malthuses, but in all those games which demanded the most perfect co-ordination of hand and eye, such as cricket and racquets, his physical fineness equalled his intellectual distinction. To the prowess of an athlete, the gifts of a born scholar and the (more questionable) graces of an æsthete, were united the advantages of great expectations; for his father was something vaguely magnificent in the city, and their home, on the fringes of Cranborne Chase near a village that, quite fortuitously, bore their name, was one of the loveliest houses in Southern England. Even at this age Julian Hinton seemed obviously destined for a shining career—he was the kind of boy whose reputation precedes him and smooths his triumphal progress all through life—and when he approached him on the subject of George Redlake, Jim was immensely flattered, though humiliated to confess his ignorance of his father's works.

"You ought to be jolly well ashamed of yourself," Julian told him. "You must read them at once. If you like I'll lend you some of them."

He did so, and, partly inspired by Julian's admiration for them, partly by the flattering connection, Jim was plunged into a feverish study of George Redlake's work. His own memories of his father were strangely unsubstantial, no more than the vague impression of a forbidding figure whose imminence, ponderable though remote, had shadowed their life at Sedgebury, a sinister falcon hovering above the Dove's Nest. Yet the influence of George Redlake had always lain in his appeal to the rebellious spirit of youth, his very ruthlessness was typical of a man who had never grown up, and Jim, as he read, was whelmed with a startling enthusiasm, reinforced, without doubt, by an imitative zeal for Julian's admiration, but vivified, apart from this, by the memory of innumerable scenes of his early childhood which his father's pen brought to life again, and excited by a mysterious, an almost terrifying apprehension of the preciseness with which, in certain images, the clear-cut shapes of his father's mind reflected the dim gropings of his own. The effect of this first reading of George Redlake in those summer water-meadows down by the Itchen was strangely disconcerting. All through it Jim had an awed and mystical sense of rediscovery, like that of a man who, rummaging in a locked drawer, is confronted by old letters whose words his own brain has imagined and his own hand written, or like that of those moments, even more obscure, when the substance of time dissolves and the bewildered mind protests: This has happened before!

The inexplicable shock of these germinal memories had one immediate result in Jim in addition to the admiring curiosity it awakened with respect to his father. It made him begin to wonder what was his mother really like. Up till that moment he had taken her for granted as the sole origin of his complex and increasingly interesting self. As a matter of routine he had written to her every Sunday, and received in return on Tuesdays a tender letter whose gentle effulgence warmed him like day's mild sunshine beating across the breakfast table; but the settled policy of his grandmother, when once she had adopted him, had decreed that the influence of Thorpe Folville must predominate, and Mrs. Redlake, who knew the temper of her mother's will and realized the advantages which Jim reaped from her sacrifice, had consented, with the result that their meetings had usually been snatched in the interval between his arriving at St. Pancras and departing from Waterloo on his way to Winchester. And though to Jim she was still, and must always be, his darling mother, the overwhelming pressure of the boy's new interests, too complicated for any attempt at explanation or sharing, quite apart from the fact that he was a baby no longer, had practically forced them to leave the relation at that. And indeed, in the new, precarious life which his mother had adopted in her plucky determination never to return to George Redlake or be beholden to him, her time was so little her own and her means so narrow that apart from two awkward and hurried week-end visits to Thorpe, disapproved of and actively harassed by his possessive grandmother, she had never achieved the opportunity of strengthening those frail threads which still bound her to Jim, obscured as they were by the firm texture of his growing life.

It was Jim himself who finally, fired by the curiosity which the reading of George Redlake's books had aroused in him, insisted on a more satisfactory meeting.

"It's a long time," he told his grandmother, "since mother was here. I wish she could come and stay."

Mrs. Weston was taking no hints. Even if Jim were too stupid to see how the land lay, Elizabeth wasn't. She put him off with: "Perhaps . . . later on," imagining that by the end of the holidays he'd have forgotten all about it.

But Jim didn't forget. By this time he had ceased to be intimidated by his grandmother. Of course he was fond of her, because, now that it suited her book, she was awfully kind to him, much kinder, indeed, to him than to Lucy, whose shy beauty was shooting up in a manner that threatened competition with her darling Margaret and was therefore, at the moment, firmly suppressed. Yet, fond and grateful as Jim might be, he couldn't help realizing what a snob his dear Gran was, nor feeling an amused indignation at the portrait of her which George Redlake had written in the cruelly ironical book that followed his visit to Thorpe. Between Jim and the doctor there was a quiet understanding in which the old lady's vagaries were viewed with respectful humour, while in Lucy's company he found himself ranged against her, if only because of their common dislike of Aunt Margaret, whose pursuit of elusive matrimony was now becoming quite melodramatic. As a matter of fact Jim's position in the Thorpe Folville household as the adopted heir was now so firm, and his grandmother, that prepotent, regal figure of his early years, had so shrunk and softened, as it seemed, into a rather deaf little old woman, that now, looming over her in his young strength, with her lace cap barely reaching his shoulder, he almost felt himself at an unfair advantage.

"When I go back to Winchester, Gran," he said, "I think I shall travel up a day earlier and stay with mother."

"I must speak to your grandpapa about that," Mrs. Weston answered with her first defensive formula.

"Oh, I've asked him about it already," Jim told her triumphantly and loudly—for Mrs. Weston's deafness was her second line of defence, behind cover of which she declined to hear anything she preferred to ignore.

"You needn't shout at me, Jim," she replied with an emphasised quietness. "We'll discuss the whole matter to-morrow."

Jim shook his head. "No, to-morrow'ld be too late, Gran. I've sent her a wire."

"A telegram!" Mrs. Weston was shocked into silence. A sixpenny telegram when a penny stamp would have done! With her daughters she had always maintained the whip hand by keeping them short; young ladies, living at home, had no need nor excuse for handling money; but Jim, thanks to his grandfather, had always money in his pocket, and against this criminally extravagant accomplished fact she had no reply. She was formidable enough, however, in her resentment. From that moment until he left the house she became, apparently, stone deaf to the addresses of everyone in the house with the exception of Aunt Margaret, retiring into a sulk so dignified and stonily statuesque that Jim felt himself doubly guilty of having betrayed his grandfather, and could no longer wonder at the way in which the doctor humoured her. Not even when he kissed her cold, soft cheek good-bye, did the strange woman unbend; and when she tipped him, instead of the usual bright sovereign she gave him ten shillings. "That will teach you to throw away money on telegrams!" her dark eyes said.

II. *The Dove's New Nest*

IT WAS certainly exciting and splendid to hail a hansom-cab under the great glass vault of St. Pancras black with the smoke of burnt-offerings made to the gods of mechanical speed; to tip the porter, as a protest against his grandmother with quite unnecessary lavishness; to go bowling out beneath the station's neo-Gothic towers between lines of cheap temperance-hotels and boarding-houses set like rabbit snares in the run of innocent provincials. In those days, the last of that plumply complacent England which the shock of the Boer War had shaken out of its after-meal nap of industrial repletion, the purlieus of Bloomsbury lay still abandoned by fashion; yet even there, on that warm Spring afternoon, the spirit of the opening season manifested itself not only in the burgeoning plane-trees of the squares but in a restless coming and going of smart tradesmen's delivery vans that darted hither and thither like brilliant newly-hatched insects intent on fertilizing those wintry mansions whose façades, under the hands of all the house-painters in London, were pushing forth green shoots of railings and wrought-iron tendrils of balconies, foretokening the creamy magnolia of their full bloom.

These harbingers of the social Spring, together with the florists' carts laden with bright bedding-plants for window-boxes and foreign palms for glazed embrasures, gave the scene an artificial brilliance more obviously stimulating to the imagination than the shy signs of awakening growth, pale primrose and white violet, which Jim and Lucy had acclaimed in the Thorpe Folville lanes. By the same token he felt that this urban Spring at its full must surely unfold a splendour more opulent than rustic eyes could dream of; and he remembered what Julian Hinton had told him about those parties, when their town-house in Berkeley Square gleamed like a tall lantern, and carriage after carriage rolled up to the striped awnings, discharging its occupants to flutter their flaming silks and jewels like moths that flaunt their wings in the light of a tropical camp-fire.

Such highly-coloured scenes, he reflected, were the natural element of people like Julian, or the Folvilles, to whom the deserted Thorpe Castle represented no more than a luxurious refuge when the stress of the season was over. These favoured creatures had the choice of two worlds in either of which they were privileged to take their pleasure at will; and the world that was unattainable to himself, the world of fashionable London, seemed to Jim, at that moment, infinitely the more desirable.

It was with some sensation of bathos that he found himself finally deposited upon the pavement of Wimpole Street opposite the house whose number was that of his mother's address. For sober professional respectability its appearance could not have been bettered, for the narrow front had been newly painted, the door was decorated with an enormous number of polished brass plates, and the door jambs furnished with such a variety of electric bell-pushes, labelled "day" and "night" and "servants" and "visitors", that he had difficulty in deciding under which category he came. Finally convinced that he was a visitor and that it was still day, he rang both and waited. A scrubbed-faced woman in a nurse's uniform, with the air of domineering efficiency which so often accompanies it, finally opened to him.

"Have you an appointment?" she said, with brisk importance.

Jim shook his head. He began to explain; but the nurse was too quick for him.

"Oh, you want to make one. Whom do you wish to consult?"

Jim mentioned his mother's name.

"Mrs. Redlake? Oh, yes. I'll tell her as soon as she's disengaged." She said this off-handedly, as though with a tinge of regret that Jim wasn't suffering from any mortal disease; then, having regarded his small luggage as though it were an offence to the laws of sanitation, led him into a gloomy, expensively-furnished waiting-room where a number of depressed human beings sat stonily glowering in silence at out-of-date copies of *Punch*. Depressed, apparently, by this cream of topical humour, they turned page after page, unseeing, only raising their eyes to direct an occasional furtive and hostile glance at each other, or to whisper some shameful secret to an awed companion.

When Jim entered, however, they all looked up with the eagerness of starved animals waiting to be fed, and, as the nurse closed the door behind him with deliberate finality, the whole room surveyed him with such pitiless, concentrated abhorrence that he felt they would be insulted if he sat down. In an access of shyness he possessed himself of one of the so-called Society papers with which the table was littered, and was about to hide himself in a corner when the door was flung open again. Once more the company hungrily gaped, while the nurse, in a forbidding, sepulchral voice, said the words: "Mr. Meaker," and an elderly gentleman who had been biting his nails next to Jim jumped up with the humble alacrity of a schoolboy summoned to the terrors of an interview with his headmaster, bidding farewell to the rest with a sickly, apologetic smile that nobody deigned to acknowledge, with the exception of a fat lady on Jim's left who declared to her companion in a throaty whisper: "It's a positive scandal . . . disgraceful . . . I've been waiting nearly an hour, and I shall tell him so"; a statement with which the whole company agreed by vigorous nods—to themselves not to each other—though what was a scandal, and who "he" was, Jim couldn't imagine.

In the meantime he found himself suddenly carried back to the mood which signs of the awakening season had aroused in him by perceiving amid the portrait gallery of distinguished, ugly, and often stupid faces for which his illustrated paper had scoured the *plages* and race-courses of Europe, one that was not only lovely but reminiscent. It pulled him up short, in the middle of a half-turned page: a snapshot taken under the palms at Cannes, the subscription told him, of the Grand Duke Sergei, the Countess of Essendine, and Lady Cynthia Folville. As he read the description he felt there must be some mistake, for the face, which, by its likeness to Cynthia's had struck his attention, belonged to a young woman taller than Lady Essendine, wearing fashionable skirts to her ankles, long gloves and an enormous picture hat; while the Cynthia whom he knew and remembered so clearly was a slim little girl in a black riding-habit streaked with red mud and a corn-coloured pigtail bobbing beneath her hard felt.

Yet the face that belonged to this dignified stranger's body, was undoubtedly Cynthia's, the cold white sunshine of Cannes illumined its details, the proud, cruel, ravishing Mortimer mouth, the imperious nose, and those eyes of unwavering, disconcerting blue beneath swallow-curved eyebrows. She gazed out at him from that page with the confidence, the self-possession of a creature proudly, invulnerably mailed in her divine youth, as though the mortal world that her bold eyes surveyed existed solely for the privilege of satisfying her desires and doing her service.

"I wonder if she is in London now," Jim thought to himself. "And I wonder if she remembers me. Of course she doesn't!"

"Lady Astill."

He came back to earth as the fat woman next to him, who answered to that name, rose slowly, still breathing indignation, to meet her fate. In the interval no less than five others had left the room, some grimly and some with Mr. Meaker's apologetic smile, yet all with the air of aristocrats marching to the guillotine under the masterful escort of the nurse who, now Jim came to think of it, resembled Madame Defarge in the *Tale of Two Cities*. The room had grown very dark and almost empty when his mother came fluttering in. She was dressed in a costume so simply formal with its stiff cuffs and collar as to resemble a uniform, and when she had kissed him she spoke to him in a lowered, awed voice, as though she were reluctant to disturb the last meditations of those victims of the guillotine who remained to make their peace with God.

"I'm so sorry, darling," she whispered, "that I couldn't come before. It's been such a busy day. Dr. Fosdyke has only just finished. You see your telegram only reached me this morning."

"Why, don't you live here?" Jim asked.

"Live here? Of course not. This is only the doctor's consulting-room. But the rooms where I live are quite near, and your bag isn't heavy."

In the lobby, where Jim picked up his luggage, they encountered Madame Defarge, who, quite appropriately, sat knitting by the stairs of the guillotine. Apart from the exercise of her macabre profession she was apparently human, for she greeted Mrs. Redlake with the friendly smile which one can conceive one hangman giving to another off duty.

"I should have known him among a thousand, Mrs. Redlake," she said. "He's the very image of you."

"Do you think so, sister?" said Jim's mother, blushing adorably.

She seemed curiously excited and tender that evening as, walking beside her, Jim carried his bag into a neighbouring and even less fashionable street. It was only when she had turned up the gas in the lodging-house sitting-room and taken off her hat that he saw how much older she had grown. Of course he had made the same mistake with her as with Cynthia Folville; but whereas Cynthia, to judge by her picture, had become more brilliant than ever, the beauty of his mother (if indeed she had really been beautiful) had certainly faded. There were lines on her cheeks, that seemed to forbid a smile; her mouth and her eyes were tired; her hair tinged with grey that gave it the bloom of frost on a faded leaf. And she was nervous—full of quick bird-like movements, as though she were frightened of staying too long in one place. Even when she kissed him—and never had he known her more greedy of kisses than that evening—he was conscious of a disturbing restlessness in the mind behind her lips.

They talked a great deal of Winchester, a little of Thorpe Folville; but when Jim, as he had determined, brought the conversation round to the subject of his father, she appeared to take fright. As she answered, her eyes seemed to be imploring him to leave it.

"I think his books are wonderful, and so does Julian," Jim told her.

"Yes, tell me more about Julian. I'm longing to know."

"Where is father now?" he persisted.

"I don't know, darling. When last I heard he was on the Riviera. At Cannes, I think . . ."

And Jim saw the shape of a palm-tree and the blue eyes of Cynthia Folville demanding the world to play with.

"I'm sure he's a very great writer, mother," he said.

"I suppose he is, Jim. Tell me, what else do you read?"

She was obstinate, just in the way that Lucy could be, and, like Lucy, supposed that he couldn't see through her obstinacy. And all the time, as it seemed to him, her eyes were watching the mantelpiece—perhaps the clock, perhaps a vase of forced lilac, whose pale blooms filled the room with a Spring-like perfume. Suddenly she said: "Now, darling, I'm going to dress. If you like you can come in and watch me . . . just like old times."

It was true. He remembered now, in the old days at the Dove's Nest, he was sometimes allowed to lie on her bed and watch her dressing on the rare evenings when she and his father went out to dine. He did so now in a different, more critical spirit, perceiving, for the first time, that she was not only his mother but a woman. He had never, with those eyes, seen a woman dressing before, and he marvelled, as she let down her hair and brushed it with swift, curiously graceful strokes, that her figure was really that of a little girl. Divested thus of her long skirts and bare-shouldered she seemed incredibly young and, somehow, pathetic.

"Are we going out to dinner?" he asked lazily.

"Yes," she answered. "I'd accepted an invitation before your wire came. Of course you'll come with me. I want my friend to see you."

"Who is your friend, mother?"

"Now, now, you needn't be frightened. It's only Dr. Fosdyke." She came over and kissed him suddenly, with a small, nervous laugh.

"Dr. Fosdyke?" Of course the name was familiar; only a few hours before he had heard it on the lips of Madame Defarge.

"Of course you don't know, darling," she went on. "I don't think I ever told you that I am his secretary. He's been frightfully good to me, Jim, and I'm sure that you'll like him, quite apart from that. Oh dear, oh dear!" she cried, for, even as she was speaking, the bell on the landing rang. "I knew I should be late," she laughed. "Quick, help me, darling. No, no, that's the wrong hook. You'd better begin at the top."

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes seemed to have lost all their tiredness as, unconscious of Jim, she arranged the last strands of her silver-dusted hair in the glass, then turned off the light and hurried into the outer room to open the door. Yes, yes, she was lovely now, Jim thought, and so much younger; she reminded him, somehow, of Lucy.

"I thought you were out."

The voice from the door was deep, the words slow-spoken, authoritative, and his mother's reply: "Oh no, I was late; I'm ashamed of myself," seemed unnecessarily humble.

"This is Jim," she said.

Dr. Fosdyke shook hands with him firmly, and his handclasp seemed in keeping with the rest of the man, who was tall and grey and square-cut, with a straight horizontal furrow marking the high brow from which he had removed his top-hat. His grey eyes, black in the gaslight, were steady and judicial; his clean-shaven mouth somewhat stern yet not unkindly.

"Is this really your boy?" he said. "You know it's incredible."

And again Jim's mother laughed, then, evading the subject, pointed to the lilac on the mantelpiece.

"It's still living, you see," she said, and the visitor smiled, with his grey eyes as well as his mouth, as she buried her face in the flowers. "We're quite ready," she said. "I have only to get my cloak." And she passed into the bedroom again, humming softly to herself, leaving Jim and Dr. Fosdyke to face each other in silence. Indeed Dr. Fosdyke had as little to say as Jim. He stood there in huge, mute embarrassment, it seemed, until Mrs. Redlake returned, with the same glowing, nervous smile on her lips, to hurry them downstairs.

Turning southward they crossed the river of light that was Oxford Street. At the crossing Dr. Fosdyke took Jim's mother's right arm, while he clung to the other, feeling somehow that less than half of her belonged to him, that her thoughts, as well as her person, were unequally divided between them. He was listening eagerly all the time for every word that Dr. Fosdyke spoke; but the doctor was almost as mute with her as with him. Yet when he did speak, in that low, heavy voice of his, it seemed to Jim that his mother hung on his words. It distressed him too that, when the street crossing was over, Dr. Fosdyke neglected to abandon his mother's arm.

By the time that they had begun their dinner in a Soho restaurant Jim felt thoroughly unhappy. However sweetly his mother contrived to draw him into their conversation, encouraging him to talk about Winchester and even Thorpe Folville, he had the impression that she was merely humouring him, or, at best endeavouring to show him off to the doctor. Her looks and her blushes, however fairly she tried to apportion them, took on a queer, childlike eagerness whenever she addressed him. It seemed evident that the head-waiter knew them together rather than separately. "The last time but one that you were here, madam," he said. More than that, a great deal of the conversation in which he was supposed to be sharing was full of allusions and symbols that seemed to hint at a secret but close understanding of which he knew nothing, in which Dr. Fosdyke's remarks were skilfully veiled compliments, and his mother's replies some tender sort of evasion. And once, when his mother raised her glass to their host, with a pretty gesture, he surprised a look in her eyes that sent him hot with a blinding flame of jealousy. He knew nothing of such things, or next to nothing, but of one thing he felt certain: these two people, that formal serious man and his mother, were in love.

From that moment he could not speak for imprisoned bitterness. He could not even think or eat; his mind was a chaos possessed by one monstrous jealousy. He hated this man; he believed he hated his mother; he hated the bowing head-waiter, who, seeing that he wasn't eating, suggested a series of sickening delicacies to tempt his appetite; he hated that place, all places, life itself, with a black and deadly hatred. But why? That question he had neither the power nor the wish to answer. It was drowned in the cry of his soul, which wished that he and everyone else were dead.

At first Mrs. Redlake was acutely troubled by his strangeness. She tried, with small sweetness, and then with teasing, to wheedle him out of it. Then, seeing that he grew grimmer and more stony every moment, she set herself to conceal the calamity from Dr. Fosdyke with little forced gaieties and coquetries which filled Jim's soul with an even deeper scorn.

The end of their party, despite her gallant efforts, was not a success. Dr. Fosdyke, most callously unperturbed, said good-bye on the doorstep of their lodging. As he shook hands with Jim, who would have done anything to escape it, his handclasp was as firm, his eyes as judicial as ever. His mother, too, said good-night in a voice that was unnaturally natural.

"Good-bye," she said, "and thank you so much. It's been lovely."

Lovely? It had been hell! How could she dissimulate like that?

They moved up the stairs in silence. As they entered the sitting-room she threw off her coat with a sigh. Then she turned, and her voice was broken at last:

"Jim, how *could* you?" she said.

"How could *I*? How could *you*? I hate him . . . I hate him . . . I hate him!"

"My darling, don't be so ridiculous. How can you hate him? You don't even know him."

"I know all I want to know, thank you. I know . . ." Then he stopped.

"Yes, Jim, what do you know?" She spoke firmly, in a tone that he had never heard in her voice before. He was obstinately silent.

"Well, if you won't speak, I must tell you. You've hurt me to-night more deeply than I've ever been hurt before. When I came up to London, Jim . . ."

"No, mother, I don't want to hear; I won't listen," he cried.

"But, Jim, you must hear."

"I can't bear it, I wish I were dead."

"Oh, Jim . . ." She put her arms round him. To his shame he was crying. He, who thought of himself as a man, was crying like a baby, while she, just as if he were a baby, cuddled and kissed him, kissed his ears and the corner of his eyes with her soft lips. And all the time, through her kisses, she was speaking the words that he hated to hear. He wouldn't hear them, he thought, and yet he had to.

"When I came up to London first—when I left you at Thorpe, Jim—I didn't know what in the world I was going to do. Not a friend . . . simply nobody. I couldn't go back to your father. Your father's a brilliant man, but a terribly strange one. No, I can't speak about him. I don't want to. After all, what good will it do you? The first job I managed to get was with Dr. Fosdyke. Without him I really don't know whatever would have happened to me. He's a good man, Jim, oh, more than that, the best man I've ever known or am ever likely to know. We've been friends, ever since, dear friends. How often we've spoken of you! He's been kind to me, and oh, so gentle, so beautifully gentle! If you love me at all, Jim, you ought to be grateful for my sake."

He listened, quite unpersuaded, even unmoved. There was something about their relationship that tied his tongue. To anyone in the world but his mother he could have spoken out; said: "I hate him because you belong to him and not to me: I hate him because he's stolen you from me!" But to her he couldn't. It was as though some strange, atavistic sexual taboo held him silent; the mere thought of putting this horrible thing into words filled him with shame. No, no, he could tell her nothing. He wished he were dead. She would never be his mother again. Never . . . Never . . .

And so crushed was his overwrought heart that in the end, for all her tenderness, she could only leave him, to toss the night through on the sofa in that miserable sitting-room possessed by the odious perfume of Dr. Fosdyke's plumed lilac.

III. *Romantic Education*

IF, AT the moment when this incident occurred, Jim had happened to be a few years younger or older, it might not have afflicted him with the scorn, the fury and the suffering which he then endured. It caught him in that unbalanced interval betwixt boyhood and manhood in which the frustration of a possessive passion can hurt most, when the unexplained emotions of sex, like the poisons of certain diseases, can uplift the mind of a creature apparently healthy into dizzy exaltations or submerge it in unfathomable depths. Jim's own reaction to the morbid process was perfectly normal: that is, Byronic. It made him detest all things feminine, and scorn every disloyal male who allowed himself to be unmanned by the soft, insidious wiles of sentiment. If human relationships were needed—and there was much to be said for the dignity of spiritual isolation—the choicest and noblest of these could be found among his own sex. Julian Hinton, for instance, that paragon of clean, intellectual athleticism, was a fitter and more inspiring companion than any woman alive. And Julian, he was convinced, would subscribe to his own declaration of independence.

But no sooner had he arrived at Winchester than Julian, on whom he had counted, knocked the bottom out of his plans by confessing that he himself had fallen in love.

"Oh Lord, don't talk about that!" Jim exclaimed. "I'm simply dead sick of it."

But Julian, it appeared, could talk about nothing else. More than that, he had actually been saving the story for Jim's delectation and sympathy: to no other living soul—not even to *her*—had he breathed a word of his feelings.

The confession came out in a spate. She was older than himself: but a woman, he eagerly affirmed, was always years younger than a man of her own age. Her husband—oh, yes, she was married, and this was what invested the affair with such sad splendour—her husband was in the diplomatic, attached to the embassy at Madrid.

Julian had seen her first in the hunting-field, at a meet of the Blackmore Vale, and she rode—God, how she could ride!—like Artemis. Quite naturally; for her father, whom posterity would certainly acclaim as a great painter, had a racing-stable somewhere on the Wiltshire Downs, though Jim mustn't imagine for one moment that she was one of those regular hunting women, the kind that smelt of the stables. On the contrary, she was probably the most brilliantly cultured creature of her generation. She knew all "The Souls." That paragon of all the talents, the Secretary for Ireland, had written verses to her. "Oh, Juliet in her petticoats," they had begun; and she, not to be outdone, had retorted in a gem of parody: "Oh, Wyndham in his tubulars" which seemed to Julian the quintessence of sprightly wit. She was something between the Janet of *Harry Richmond* and Clara Middleton, which was not surprising, for George Meredith knew and admired her; and indeed, when you came to think of it, the atmosphere of a Meredith novel was her proper setting: wide, breezy downlands and great skies heaped with the cloud-pageantry of his beloved South West. All art was her province; she could paint, she could play and sing like an angel. During that stupendous week she had found time to fire him with her own passion for Wagner, a new heaven and a new earth of music, solemnized by the sonorities of dwindling godhead, exalted by Brunnhilde's fierce virginity—yes, *she* was a Valkyrie—and bewitched by the magic potion of Tristan's hallucinated love. From the moment when first they gazed into each other's eyes he had known himself for a reincarnation of that tragic hero and realized how life was but the shadow of Art. The wood, in which they had said good-bye, had been just like the scene of the Second Act, made musical by running water and the wailing of a distant horn. He had kissed her hand. Ah, heaven, he had kissed her hand.

"But if she's married," said Jim, "I don't see how anything can come of it."

"No. That is what makes it so marvellous," said Julian gloomily.

"And if you think about nothing else," Jim reminded him, "your cricket will go to the dogs."

"Cricket!" Julian repeated scornfully. "My God, can't you understand?"

Jim couldn't. Indeed, for the moment it seemed as if this guilty, if noble passion must rob him of the companionship to which he had looked forward as a refuge from his own disappointment and the crowning consolation of his last year at Winchester. This changeling was so obsessed by his anonymous lady's perfections, and rehearsed them so often, that in spite of Julian's enthusiasm, Jim ended by being bored with them. Later, since the object of his passion, whose strong sense of duty was one of her tragic attributes, had dutifully returned to Madrid and forgotten all about him, Julian turned for consolation to the works of art which she particularly admired, submitting Jim to more than heroic doses of Wagner, Swinburne, Keats and all the Pre-Raphaelites. And just as the smoking of Indian hemp can heighten the addict's sensibility to all sensual impressions of sound, colour and taste, so this continued dosing with Julian's hashish produced in Jim's overstrung spirit an emotional state in which every chord was thrilled to violent vibration.

Up till this time the arts had meant little to Jim. It was hardly surprising that his mother, with the awful example of George Redlake's egotism in mind, distrusted their influence. At Thorpe Folville their claims were represented by Aunt Margaret's music, which was no more than a weapon of light calibre in her matrimonial armament, and the literary attachments of Mr. Holly which, because they were Mr. Holly's, Jim's manliness had despised. Though the doctor's knowledge of Surtees, the Ingoldsby Legends and Pickwick was almost as intimate as Mrs. Weston's acquaintance with Debrett, no other books than these were read at The Grange, while no flower of romantic art could be conceived as blooming in the chill austerity of Mr. Malthus's mind. At Winchester, again, his brain had been so devoted to "useful" instruction and his body to "healthy" pursuits, that the sense of beauty was still entirely undeveloped; at the age of seventeen his mind was almost as much that of a child as his grandfather's at sixty; and since, as physicians agree, it is safer and more comfortable to take measles young, the infection that Julian now passed on to him had consequences of undue severity.

Its effect was shattering. He became, for the first time, a sentient human being. His eyes were opened, and lo! a new heaven and a new earth—a heaven so possessed by splendid terrestrial images, an earth so unearthly in its celestial beauty, that his soul was too full to garner the richness of either. They lived, those two, amid words and sights and sounds too lovely to be borne, each day, each hour revealing some new intolerable beauty, from the first tender whimpers of birdsong at dawn to which magic morning awakened, through long noons, when that music was stilled and slow shadows of cloud brooded over their downland pastures, till, at evening, the hot glides of the river gleamed like steel that simmered with the ringed bubbles of rising trout, and the great elms stood solemnly bowed beneath billows of leaf, and the tower of St. Swithin, no longer stone, was a presence, an image of mortal aspirations and piety reaching to heaven.

"It must have been like this," Julian told him, "when Keats came down to stay here. Don't forget that he wrote the Nightingale Ode and the Ode to Autumn in Winchester. I wonder what he would have thought of Swinburne and Meredith!"

They wondered so much in these days. Jim wondered a great deal, in particular, about Julian's love affair. The emotions that sprang from it had become so integral a part of the life which they shared, that, although he had never seen the lady or, indeed, imagined her as more than a figure vaguely discerned through the rosy mists of erotic poetry, he had almost begun to count himself a partner in Julian's noble if star-crossed passion. Searching for some object more ponderable to invest with his own excess of sentiment, and finding that the varieties of the female form available at Winchester had been selected, wisely perhaps, with no regard to æsthetics, he decided, all of a sudden, that he was in love with Lucy. It was unfortunate that Lucy, apart from the eugenic disadvantages of blood-relationship, had no serious defects that might intensify his passion by taboos or frustrations, and Lucy, whatever else she might be, was anything but an intellectual romantic. It consoled him, however, to learn, when he showed a blurred snapshot in which she figured along with Aunt Margaret, that Lucy resembled, however slightly, the lady in Madrid, and was therefore approved.

"Of course," Julian told him, "she's quite different really. After all, your cousin is only a child. Some day," he said patronisingly, "I should like to meet her and see for myself. And whoever is that awful, large-mouthed female standing beside her?"

Jim evaded the question. It was more than could reasonably be expected of him to own up to Aunt Margaret. Unluckily, as Fortune

—or Mrs. Weston—would have it, that humiliation awaited him. Julian's love-affair hadn't, as Jim had prophesied, played the deuce with his cricket. It had actually shed a hectic brilliance on everything that he did, enlivening his multitudinous talents to a kind of Elizabethan perfection. The Eton and Winchester match was to be played that year at Eton, and Jim's grandmother, fired by the example of Mr. Jewell (who never missed one) and not to be outdone by him, had decided to come down from Leicestershire with Lucy and Aunt Margaret for the occasion. The investment was potentially a profitable one, for, during the last weeks of the hunting-season, Aunt Margaret's glances, by sheer weight and persistence, had succeeded in penetrating the hide of a bull-necked young man named Mohun, the heir at several removes—but one never knew!—of a Border baronet. His name, though inconspicuous in Debrett, had been blazoned in chivalry before Debrett was dreamed of, being as Norman as well it could be; a fact which, perhaps, accounted for his complete insensibility, a stammer, which hardly mattered considering what he failed to say, and a squint which made it possible that the looks which reached Margaret were actually intended for somebody else. Rupert Mohun, like Mr. Jewell, was an old Etonian. Apart from hunting and cricket he had no interests. The dates of the Winchester match and Lord's were as sacred to him as Christmas and Easter to Mr. Malthus, and much more sacred than was either to Mr. Jewell. He was certain to be at Eton. Hence Mrs. Weston's pilgrimage to the Playing Fields on which Margaret's Waterloo might be won.

And, quite apart from the pursuit of the unconscious Captain Mohun, this event, to which Jim looked forward with misgiving, was in perfect accord with his grandmother's sense of social selectness; for though anybody who paid at the gate, as Mr. Jewell explained, could put on a top-hat and coat-tails and go swaggering to Lord's, the Winchester match was not a smart function but the private concern of a relatively small and distinguished family—the family, in short, to which, through Jim, Mrs. Weston belonged.

In the beginning it had been arranged that Jim should stay with the Hintons in Berkeley Square, and go down to Eton by train on the days of the match; but when the time came they realised that Julian, with the rest of the Winchester team, would sleep in College and breakfast at the Provost's Lodge, which meant that Jim had much better put up at a Windsor hotel with his own people.

He arrived there early on the first day, with an uproarious party of Wykehamists. In his separation from Julian he felt rather lonely, and Windsor itself, its wide street sweeping upward round the curve of the Castle ramp, seemed intolerably smug and polished after the reserved quietude of Winchester. The very platform on which he waited, backed by the gaunt, gothic pretentiousness of the Royal Waiting-rooms, depressed him.

When the train steamed in to the terminus his worst fears were confirmed. He saw that Aunt Margaret, whether by accident or design, was clothed from head to foot in Eton blue. Even her parasol was of the colour of baby-ribbon, and, though the day was dull, he could see that she was longing to open it. It was bad enough that any member of his party should declare such aggressively strong Etonian sympathies; but the thing that distressed him as a Wykehamist was not so much the partisan nature of her adornment as the fact that it made her—and through her, himself—conspicuous, the one thing that no self-respecting Wykehamist was ever permitted to be. Her manner, in contradistinction to her dress, was happily somewhat subdued, the occasion being even more important from her point of view than from Jim's.

Mrs. Weston, as usual, was dressed in black satin. There was nothing in her appearance that Jim could feel ashamed of. Indeed, as the appropriately named Victoria and pair carried them out of the station yard and under the shadow of the Curfew Tower, he couldn't help feeling they should have turned uphill in the direction of the State Apartments instead of downhill to the bridge, so completely, in dignity and poise if not in figure, did his grandmother resemble the late Queen's Majesty—her slim body erect, her eyes imperious, her pale clear-cut features an ivory replica of the royal profile as stamped on the coinage of the eighteen-seventies.

As they crossed the Thames a shower swept over them, and Aunt Margaret, who had been waiting for the chance, shot up her pale blue parasol. Top-hatted Etonians stared and looked after her; some even smiled, as no Wykehamist would ever have smiled. As they dismounted outside the Playing Fields a number of louts, selling favours of the two blues, swarmed round them, and Jim was in two minds about buying Aunt Margaret a dark blue rosette to correct her disgraceful display, until it occurred to him that the more thoroughly Etonian she looked, the better for Winchester.

But he did buy a favour for Lucy, presenting it shyly, because, though she didn't know it, he was supposed to be in love with her. All the way down from the station Jim had been watching her, wondering how she compared in the flesh with the blurred snapshot which he had shown to Julian and invested with so many romantic ardours during the summer term. He was not disappointed. Dressed in her filmy sprigged muslin, a wide tulle hat overshadowing those violet eyes, her throat and cheeks delicately coloured by the haymakers' sun, her dark hair coiled in a lustrous pigtail behind, she seemed so softly brown, so demure, and, by virtue of the billowing muslin, so sweetly unsubstantial, that Jim flamed with pride to think how he would submit her charms to Julian's critical eyes. Herself was more lovely far than the image he had treasured so ardently and yet rather doubtfully. It thrilled him particularly to remember the patronising air with which Julian had described her as a child; for he knew that, in spite of the pigtail, Lucy was a child no longer. Beneath the sprigged muslin he could see the soft curve of her breast. In the eyes that demurely appraised him there was a look that he had not seen before, very different from the glance with which as a little girl she had asserted the superiority of her sex over his male uncouthness. They regarded him now, if not with possessive satisfaction, at least with a respect that made him feel proud and, alas, so self-conscious that he actually blushed. Well, it was just about time, Jim thought, that she should realize his importance. If she was humble now, how much more humble she would be when she realized that she had been honoured by his romantic passion. He wished to goodness that, in the confusion of the platform, he had not been so flustered and embarrassed by Aunt Margaret's costume as to forget to kiss her. It would be wonderful, he thought, to kiss that soft brown cheek which the quick blood of youth warmed so sweetly . . . and then her red lips, with the ravishing dimples that came when she smiled as now she was smiling. This evening perhaps . . .

When they reached their seats, on the Eton side of the Playing Fields, his anxiety to be dissociated from Aunt Margaret was as nothing compared with his eagerness to sit next to Lucy. The chairs beside theirs were unoccupied; but Mrs. Weston, whose eyes missed nothing, discovered, to her immense satisfaction, that they were ticketed with the names of the Marquess and Marchioness of Clun, and insisted that Margaret should have the privilege of the place of honour next to these notabilities, rehearsing, with hushed emphasis, the whole lineage of the Powyses and exactly who Lady Clun had been before she was married.

"On an occasion like this," she explained, "you might meet *anyone.*"

"I don't see a sign of Captain Mohun," said Margaret wistfully.

"Now for goodness sake don't be hysterical," Mrs. Weston warned her.

Meanwhile Jim profited from his grandmother's absorption in genealogy by explaining to Lucy just what was happening on the field. It was the first time in his life that he had ever known her submissive, overawed by the world of which he himself was a privileged member. Her anxiety to be instructed put him in the highest of spirits, quite apart from the fact that he knew himself to be in the admiring company of the prettiest girl within view. He began to talk loudly and with what seemed to him a most brilliant self-confidence, telling her the names of the Eton team which he remembered from last year's match, unfolding the complete history of the pair of batsmen who had opened the Winchester innings with such easy confidence.

"I think we shall run away with it this year," he told her superbly, and too soon, for even as he spoke, the Winchester captain was caught at the wicket.

"Now you'll see some fun," he told her. "Julian's in next."

His heart beat wildly as Julian left the pavilion, exchanging a leisurely word with the outgoing batsman as he walked to the wicket. He wanted to tell Lucy how wonderful Julian was, how he was his friend, and no-one else's; to speak of their splendid companionship, the marvels they had shared together; to paint that romantic figure in all the hues of his adoration.

"Now, if ever you expect to see a perfect style," he told her, "here's your chance!"

But Lucy, it seemed, for once, could not share his enthusiasm.

When she should have been looking at Julian's first ball he heard her say dreamily: "What extraordinary waistcoats these Eton boys wear! Look at that one."

Jim did not answer. He drew a breath of relief. Julian had survived the first ball.

"Oh, Jim, *do* look at that waistcoat!"

Waistcoat indeed! His eager watchfulness was tempered by a shade of regret that this creature by his side, so inimitably fashioned, was, after all, incapable of the higher sensibility. The second ball Julian cut for three, and so lost the bowling.

"What did you say?" Jim charitably enquired.

"That waistcoat. It must be brocade. Why, Jim, I believe it's Lord Folville."

Mrs. Weston pricked up her ears.

"What did you say, Lucy?"

"I believe it's Lord Folville, Gran. Yes, I'm sure it is!"

Mrs. Weston stiffened her back to a new rigidity; her queenly glance swept the field behind them like the beam of a lighthouse, then returned to its former focus.

"Don't stare, Lucy," she whispered. "Yes, Margaret, Lady Essendine is just behind with Alice Folville. Be ready to bow."

But the bow never materialized. At that moment all social concerns were swamped in a wave of Etonian enthusiasm as, with the next ball but one, Julian Hinton's off-stump flew out of the ground.

"What rotten bad luck!" Jim cried. "The pitch must be bumpy."

It was rotten bad luck for poor Mrs. Weston as well, as she watched, through the tail of her eye, the lanky figure of Alec Folville and his mother's elegant presence retreat. It would have been even worse luck for her if, at that instant, their eagerly awaited neighbours, the Cluns, had not arrived; Lord Clun, after courteously arranging the chair for his Lady, being shocked into apologizing to Margaret for passing in front of her—less, perhaps, from a sense of his own pardonable discourtesy than by the vision of pale blue that met his astonished eyes, and being even more disconcerted by the blushing "Oh, thank you . . . *Niente*," with which Margaret, startled into Italian, received his apology.

Mrs. Weston, thrilled to her spine by even so exiguous a contact with her neighbours, sat up stiff as a pointer who has scented game;

Margaret gathered her skirts together self-consciously, mutely awaiting another overture; even Lucy, at Jim's side, glanced shyly sideways in the Cluns' direction. But Jim could only feel how unjust it was that Julian, his paragon, should be out for three. The sole consolation he could find in this catastrophe was the fact that Julian, who must now be taking off his pads, had promised to come and find them. He wanted Julian to see with his own eyes how frightfully pretty Lucy was, and only hoped that by some intervention of Providence Aunt Margaret's embarrassing presence might be removed before he appeared.

IV. *Antique Towers*

IT CAME, in the questionable shape of the bull-necked Captain Mohun, whose arrival announced itself in a loud and—as it seemed to Jim—particularly stupid laugh, to whose brazen summons Aunt Margaret replied in a sort of high, tinkling antiphon. This laugh, which appeared to be Rupert Mohun's nearest approach to articulate speech, issued from a wide slit furnished with strong regular teeth and set in an expanse of face which resembled in colour and expressiveness a red brick wall. The likeness of Captain Mohun's mouth to a letter-box was emphasised by the fact that his heavily moustached upper lip jutted over the lower in the manner of a weather-shield, reducing the chin, which was supported by a high starched collar, and the forehead, retreating under a ludicrously small bowler hat, to complete insignificance. If he looked, at this moment, more simian than Norman, Jim could not deny that he seemed a magnificent specimen of chest-thumping anthropoid, though he could not guess whether the brick-like coloration which suffused not only his skin but the whites of his eyes was the result of a passion that choked him for the lack of expression or merely of a habit of body so sanguine as to border on apoplexy. In any case, after an introduction that was acknowledged by a positive bellow of laughter, Captain Mohun possessed himself of the willing Margaret and swept her away, with apparent pride, to some lair on the other side of the field.

A moment later, faithful to his promise, Julian arrived. Jim's heart warmed to see him advancing, such a contrast in his slim, athletic refinement to Margaret's gross suitor. As he watched his approach he wondered, hopelessly, if Lucy would have the wit to appreciate how Julian, his own friend, towered above all others in beauty and strength and intellect. He was anxious, too, that Julian should approve of Lucy, who, in spite of her gentle demureness, seemed a slender and almost pitifully childish creature compared with the object of Julian's passion. There was a moment of acute anxiety when Julian's dark eyes assayed her, with the glance that a swift-winged, scornful falcon might give to a fledgling hedge-sparrow, and another, vaguely disquieting, when Lucy blushed, more deeply than she had blushed for him, and her violet eyes were hidden by the long lashes as she lowered them. But if Lucy were over-impressed—or impressed in a way that aroused an indefinite qualm of disquietude—Mrs. Weston, apparently, was not impressed at all. The propinquity of Lord Clun on her right had translated her to regions in which mere unconnected commoners like Julian counted for nothing, while the distant figure of Margaret, whose dress betrayed her progress as a rabbit is betrayed by its tail, engrossed her attention; yet, even so, her old-world canons of behaviour constrained her to make polite conversation.

"I've heard a great deal about you, Mr. Hinton," she said, with a touch of severity. "You and Jim are great friends, it appears. You come, I believe, from Dorset—or is it Wiltshire?—a county with which I'm quite unacquainted. My own family, the Delahays, come from Shropshire originally," she continued, her voice slightly raised for the benefit of the unconscious Lord Clun. "I don't suppose you know many people in our part of the world either."

"Let me see. . . . Where are you? Somewhere in High Leicestershire, isn't it? Oh, yes, I know plenty. My mother's great friends the Essendines live there, don't they?"

Mrs. Weston's back stiffened to attention. Her eyes surveyed Julian with interest and approval. "The Essendines? Yes. Lord Essendine is our nearest neighbour. We actually live at Thorpe Folville."

"Thorpe Folville? Really? Why haven't you ever told me that, Jim?"

"Oh, I don't know. We just never happened to talk about it."

"But Thorpe Folville . . . I know every inch of it. Why, I used to go and stay with them constantly—in the old days, you know, before I went to Winchester and before Lord Essendine blossomed out into a blessed Viceroy. I still see them in town occasionally. They're home, by the way—Lady Essendine and Cynthia anyhow—and I shouldn't wonder a bit if they're down here to-day. You know Alec's at Eton?"

Mrs. Weston glowed. "They *are* down here to-day," she said. "I caught sight of Lady Essendine and Lord Folville a few minutes ago, though I didn't have a chance of bowing."

"What fun! Let's look round and find them," said Julian, a little too eager, Jim thought, to escape from Mrs. Weston's society. "*You'll* come with us, won't you?" he added, with a swift glance at Lucy.

"I think I'll stay here if you don't mind," said Mrs. Weston, who hadn't, in fact, been included in the invitation, but found herself torn between the duty of watching Margaret and this signal opportunity of contact with the Folvilles. "But I hope," she continued regally, "that when next you come to Thorpe Castle you will spare us a day or two. I know that Jim will be very disappointed if you don't."

"Why of course, I'd love to," said Julian. But it seemed to Jim that this ready acceptance was intended less for his grandmother's ears than for Lucy's, and that Lucy, in her quiet way, fully realised the intention. What was more, as they abandoned Mrs. Weston to look for the Folvilles, Jim found himself separated from Lucy by Julian's tall, blue-blazered figure and left very much in the cold. For the moment, his friend seemed entirely to have forgotten him. It was to Lucy he spoke—far more easily than Jim could have spoken to any girl. For her his lips smiled and his dark eyes flashed, and Jim, watching them both, him so eager and her so softly responsive, was consumed by a curious double-edged jealousy: of Lucy, who appeared to be so much more interested in Julian than in himself, of Julian, whose loyalty could melt away so easily beneath one flash of those violet eyes. He remembered with regret that it was he himself who had encouraged Julian to notice Lucy's physical resemblance to the unattainable lady in Madrid, and felt reasonably indignant at the affectation of interest which Lucy was showing in Julian's explanation of the game's progress: a subject which, on his own lips, had obviously bored her.

"It was rotten bad luck to get out like that," he heard her saying. "I suppose the pitch must have been bumpy?" The baggage was actually echoing his own words—she, who didn't understand the very first thing about cricket! And Julian, poor innocent, was lapping it up as a kitten laps cream!

"Oh, I beg your pardon, sir!" In his fury, Jim had blindly collided with two doddering Etonians who were exchanging reminiscences of fifty years ago; and when, having made his apologies, he caught up with the others again he was more deeply disgusted than ever to find that they were discussing not cricket but music and poetry, about which Lucy knew even less.

"I ran full tilt into that old buffer," he breathlessly explained; but for all the notice they took of him he might just as well have held his tongue.

"Francis Thompson? Of course I know all about him, though I don't just remember . . ." Lucy was saying. Don't just remember indeed! Jim knew perfectly well that Lucy had never even heard Francis Thompson's name; and the fact that Julian, poor dear, was actually believing her nonsense filled his mind with a mixture of scorn and pity for Julian's innocence: a novel sensation which was complicated by an intense disgust for Lucy's unscrupulousness. And yet, as he watched her sweet lips smiling on Julian, he wanted to kiss them more violently than ever before. It was small consolation now to remember the unusual deference which she had shown him at Windsor station that morning. It seemed that this sweet submission had not been evoked by him personally: it was merely part of a new attitude of flattery which Lucy had adopted toward his own sex in general. It almost seemed as if she had been taking lessons from Aunt Margaret. He hated her for it; he almost hated Julian, and felt righteously indignant on behalf of the lady in Madrid whose devotion his friend had so ficklely betrayed. He hated, beyond words, all these pasty-faced, foppish Etonians with their fancy waistcoats. No fellow with any sense of decency, for instance, could wear one like that!

Even as the thought formed itself in his mind he saw that the wearer of this particular atrocity was smiling in his direction. "There's old Alec," cried Julian, and a moment later Jim found himself blinded by the azure gaze of Cynthia Folville.

"You can't possibly remember me," he said.

"Remember you? Of course I do. You're Jim Redlake, aren't you? I shall never forget the way you came off that day. But I'd no idea that you were a friend of Julian's. Are you at Winchester, too? I'm afraid you're going to be beaten."

"If you'd seen the enormous breakfast the Provost gave us," Julian grumbled, "you wouldn't be surprised. I believe he did it on purpose to spoil our game."

"No excuses now, Julian!" Cynthia smiled. "You played right across the ball that bowled you. I saw it with my own eyes."

As she spoke, those eyes, which for one instant had gaily challenged Julian's, swept full upon Jim. Their loveliness caught his breath, their boldness staggered him. It was the glance of a creature utterly, imperiously secure in the consciousness of her own commanding beauty, so frankly, fearlessly confident of that divine birthright's power as to abandon all the reserves and cautions with which human beings protect themselves. "Whoever you may be," they seemed to say, "you can no more touch me than you can touch a star. Therefore feast on my beauty, be drunk with it, I shall not care!" And Jim, as his own eyes wavered in that blue flame, was whelmed, at one moment, by raptured exaltation and complete hopelessness, knowing that in one glance he had compassed heaven and hell, the height of all human aspiration and the depth of despair.

"He did play across it, didn't he?" she was saying. "Don't you agree with me?"

Once more, like an echo of what he had heard so long since on their ride from Cold Orton, he heard the deep tones of her voice, that exquisite crisp articulation that turned each word into a figure of crystal. Once more, but with feelings how different, his hungry eyes saw the sweet curve of the lovely Mortimer mouth, the proud nostrils, so delicately moulded on cheeks whose fine texture was softly bloomed as a petal of apple-blossom, yet firmly translucent as alabaster flushed with rose. She was so beautifully young that he could not speak, and his dumbness made her eyes change to a swift impatience, as though they were asking: "Why don't you answer me?"

"Because I worship you!" his heart cried; but his stupid lips could no more than murmur with an awkward smile: "I'm sorry. I didn't see."

"Oh, you Wykehamists!" she scoffed. "You'll never admit anything! I suppose that's your cousin?" she said, with a swift glance at Lucy. "Yes, of course, I remember her quite well; she was there at the meet at Cold Orton. How I long to be back at Thorpe Folville; we haven't been there for ages. My father's been viceroy, you know, for the last four years, and we never get further than London. I suppose you take fences better now?" she mischievously enquired. "Do you remember our race?"

"I shall never forget it," Jim told her, with a significance that appeared to be lost on Cynthia; for already her quick eyes had noticed that her brother and Julian, with Lucy between them, had wandered away round the field.

"I suppose we'd better follow," she said imperiously, and set off in pursuit of them, while Jim, walking beside her in a state of beatific confusion, began to wonder if, after all, the Etonian tails and waistcoats weren't more smart and imposing than the undistinguished attire that Wykehamist tradition imposed on him. It was all very well for Julian, in his snowy flannels and dark blue blazer; quite apart from his natural distinction, which would carry him anywhere, everyone would realize that he was a member of the Winchester team; but, walking with Cynthia, even in his very best clothes, he felt at a disadvantage, and wished to heaven that his appearance were worthier of her company, though she, he reflected, was sufficiently elegant for both of them. Till that moment he had been so dazzled by her presence that he hadn't even noticed her clothes; but now that he dared to examine them he was more thankful than ever for the blind gallantry with which Captain Mohun had removed the shame of Aunt Margaret's. Even Lucy's sprigged muslin, which only that morning at the station had impressed him with its soft delicacy, seemed, in comparison with Cynthia's, incredibly rustic. It wasn't that Cynthia's clothes were strikingly noticeable: the fact that he hadn't observed them before this spoke for that. It was the triumph of her exquisite body to make whatever she wore seem an integral part of it, as the sheathed sepals which enclose it seem part of a flower. Indeed, through the haze of words and images with which his fancy, so drugged with the honey of Julian's romantic poetry, clothed her remembered presence, it was as a flower—a slender Rossettian lily, pale-stemmed and golden-stamened—that she most clearly revealed herself, and the vague scent of lily-of-the-valley in which she moved seemed the perfume of the girl herself rather than that of the waxen blooms whose blanched leaves matched so nearly the hue of the chiffon that swathed her breast. He was too drunk with her beauty that day even to be consciously proud of it, thinking rather of his own unworthiness than of the honour her company reflected, and Cynthia, to give her her due, seemed quite unaware of either, unless she were so aware of both as to take them for granted. As they spoke of most ordinary things her eyes and her smile would dazzle him; yet neither the smile nor the glances that she lavished were really intended for Jim, being the expression of her own spirit's freedom and youth and happiness, as little controlled or supported by any earthly companionship as the sunlit clouds that dappled the high heaven above the elm-tops embosoming Agar's Plough.

"Now that father's job's finished," she told him, "we are almost sure to come down to Thorpe after Cowes. We shan't go up to Scotland just yet, I'm sure, for Glen Shrieven's been let to some American people. And big drives are a bore. Don't you think so?"

Jim thought only that her lips were too lovely for any words. However in the world, he wondered, had he wanted to kiss Lucy's?

"We must get Julian Hinton to come down and stay at Thorpe," she was saying. "Such a fashionable young man! Are you really great friends? It looks as if we shall be able to offer him the necessary inducement. Your cousin, I mean. What's her name? Sounds like Wordsworth. She *is* pretty, isn't she?"

It seemed impious to speak of Lucy's prettiness in Cynthia's presence. Why not say so? Of course he couldn't. His brain was a whirlpool of words unutterable. But before his tongue found the hesitant commonplace to which convention condemned him, her swift mind had leapt onward, not caring, apparently, whether he answered or was silent.

"Why, they've disappeared! We's lost them. How stupid!" she cried. "There's somebody smiling at you. Who is she? Oh, what an appalling frock!"

It was Aunt Margaret, whose face, intoxicated with achievement, was almost as red by now as that of her companion, whom she was leading about in triumph as a farmer displays a prize bull. Jim shamefully evaded the last question by answering the first one.

"I haven't the least idea," he said. "They can't have gone far."

"Well, let's wait till they find us," said Cynthia; but that heavenly promise was quickly interrupted by the arrival of Alec Folville, very tall and slim and small-headed under his curly-brimmed topper. It was characteristic, Jim thought in his sensitiveness, that this haughty young man should address himself solely to his sister.

"Hullo, *here* you are!" he said brusquely. "I've been looking for you everywhere. Where's Julian got to?"

"My dear! How on earth should I know? I thought he was with you."

"I know. I just turned to speak to a fellow and he disappeared. With Miss What-d'ye-call-'em. I didn't catch her name."

"Her name's Lucy. She's Jim Redlake's cousin. I really don't blame him. She's too dreadfully attractive." She turned to Jim. "Aren't you just a bit jealous?" she mocked him.

"Well, I give him up," said Alec abruptly. "It's time for lunch, anyway. Don't you think we'd better move along?"

Was it purposely rude or just natural, Jim wondered, that he should be treated as though he didn't exist? There was a moment of terrible doubt, in which Cynthia divinely came to his rescue.

"All right. Good-bye, Mr. Redlake," she said, "and thank you so much for looking after me. We shall see you at Thorpe, of course? *Do* make Julian come!"

She held out her long-fingered hand; and Alec, who seemed suddenly aware of Jim's presence, shook hands as well.

"So long, Redlake," he said. "We'll look forward to seeing you at Thorpe." And his smile as he spoke, to Jim's wonder, was almost as brilliant and just as impersonal as Cynthia's. There was even, Jim felt, an impersonal finality in their farewell. As soon as they left him he knew that he had passed completely out of their minds, while his own, as he stood there, not daring to turn his eyes and catch the last glimpse of the vanishing lily-green figure, went singing on like a smitten bell, whose vibrations linger and dwell on the air in eddying overtones long after the clapper has fallen.

Thus possessed and transported he made his way back, through that crowd which is at once the rudest and the politest on earth, to the place where his grandmother sat bolt upright keeping guard like a faithful hound over the body of Lord Clun, who had nodded asleep in his chair. So personal a responsibility did she feel for her neighbour's repose that as Jim approached she put her finger to her lips, signalling silence, and, when she spoke to him, lowered her voice to a whisper.

"Where is Lucy?" she asked.

Jim hadn't the least idea; at the moment he had totally forgotten Lucy's existence.

"I left her with Julian Hinton," he said.

"Alone . . .?"

"Well, Alec Folville was with them when I saw her last."

"Lord Folville. Ah. . . . Why did you never tell me that this Hinton boy was friendly with them?"

"I didn't happen to know until this morning."

"I like your friend. He is good-looking and has nice manners. I hope he'll come and stay with us."

"He's sure to. The Folvilles are coming to Thorpe in August," Jim blurted out, and the mere fact of putting this glorious news into words made his head spin.

"How do you know that, Jim?"

"Lady Cynthia told me. I had a long talk with her."

"That's very curious. Mrs. Jewell has no idea that they're coming. Only last week she assured me that they weren't expected this year. Are you certain of that?"

"Quite certain. The last thing she said was: 'We'll see you at Thorpe.' "

Mrs. Weston extended her back and threw out her chest, preening herself like a pouter pigeon. The day was already a success. She had spoken to Lord Clun about the weather, and still cherished hopes of bowing to Lady Essendine; Lucy had taken a walk with Alec Folville and Jim with Cynthia; Captain Mohun, it seemed, had not yet escaped from Margaret; Julian Hinton—she really must "look him up" again—was coming to act as a sort of liaison between The Grange and The Castle; finally—and this was a triumph subtly personal—she had actually forestalled Mrs. Jewell in knowledge of the Essendines' movements. The fact that the Winchester batting had suddenly collapsed, with nine wickets down before lunch, simply didn't concern her. And, curiously enough, it didn't much concern Jim, though it brought Captain Mohun round to bray like a laughing jackass over the success of Margaret's colours—which were blatant enough, in all conscience, to have demoralized the Winchester team at long range—and a few moments later, Julian, who came back to deposit Lucy, in case the last wicket should fall and the Eton innings begin before lunch. Jim and he hurried over to the pavilion side by side, while Julian breathlessly enlarged on the subject of Lucy's attractions.

"She's much prettier than one would imagine from that photograph," he said. "I don't wonder at your admiring her. But why didn't you say how extraordinarily intelligent she is? And so well-read, too! She doesn't say much, you know; she's shy; but it's easy to see she loves all the things that we love. Francis Thompson, for instance . . ."

Jim laughed in his heart. Poor Julian! Could he really be so gullible as that? Well, if he were, so much the better! It would be difficult to explain that during the last hour his own feelings for Lucy had suffered a radical change and that nothing would please him better than that Julian himself should fall in love with her, if only for the sake of distracting his attention from Cynthia; so he violated his conscience by agreeing that Lucy's artistic sensibility was all that Julian believed it to be.

"There's another thing, Jim," said Julian significantly: "You may say she's a child. So she is. But there's something in that, of itself, that makes her amazingly attractive. Her utter virginity of body and mind!" He shook his head, and Jim knew that he was making comparisons to the disadvantage of the lady in Madrid. "You're a lucky devil, my boy, and don't you forget it! You could mould a girl like that to anything you wanted."

Let him try moulding Lucy! Jim thought. "She's very different," he suggested, "from Cynthia Folville."

"The Folville girl? My dear Jim! Different isn't the word. Of course Cynthia's quite lovely in a way; but she's just not my type, while your Lucy"—his fine lips smiled bitterly—"unfortunately is. Now I've told you the truth," he went on, "so I suppose you won't want me to come and stay with you at Thorpe."

"My dear Julian, don't be so ridiculous! Of course I want you to come."

"Well, your blood be on your own head if you do!" said Julian darkly.

The rest of that day at Eton passed like an uneasy dream. Four times, after lunch, Jim made his apologies to Lucy, whose charms he now viewed with a distaste not unmingled with guilt, and went off to circle the playing-field with hungry eyes in search of the pallid green figure of Cynthia, returning unsatisfied to listen in a kind of trance to the recollections of family history with which Mrs. Weston entertained Captain Mohun, who had been brought to rest and was now firmly tethered between herself and Margaret.

"I suppose you know," she was saying, "that the Mohun shield originally bore a cross engrailed, and, oddly enough, our own arms—I mean those of the Shropshire Delahays, who are cousins of mine—have the same bearing with a martlet proper in the quarter. What a pity," she sighed, "that your ancestor, the last Lord Mohun, got killed in a duel like that."

"Ha-ha-ha! Very interestin'. Ha-ha-ha! Got killed?" Captain Mohun barked; and, as he did so, he seemed to Jim to resemble some big kind of dog, an otter-hound perhaps, with his puzzled, rather stupid brown eyes set close in his narrow brow and the shaggy brown fringe of moustache straggled over his wide, simple mouth. He sat there between them obediently, yet rather resentfully, like a dog that is cowed by a leash; yet his thoughts—such as they were—were not with Mrs. Weston in her heraldic theme, but wandering away on the only trails where they felt at home—the wide pastures of the Shires or Northumbrian streams where he passionately hunted the otter till cubbing began again. It was pathetic, in a way, to see this mighty hunter so hunted; for the light of triumph in Mrs. Weston's eyes foretold that a kill was in sight. He sat there so cowed and helpless, with his huge hands folded, that Jim felt a positive relief when suddenly, with a louder and less intelligible bark than ever, he sprang to his feet and went galloping away as though impelled by some urgent physical need.

"*Well*, Margaret?" asked Mrs. Weston in a hushed voice.

"There's no need to worry, mother," Margaret answered smugly.

"He didn't *say* anything?"

"Oh no, he never does. He finds that so awfully difficult."

"What a pity," Mrs. Weston sighed, "the title's extinct! I suppose they might get it revived. Those things, as I understand, are merely a matter of money. I wish he hadn't gone rushing away like that. I might have said something. Do you think we might make an announcement?"

"Oh no, mother, I wouldn't do that," said Margaret earnestly. "He's too awfully sensitive. I think," she went on, "if I were you, I should just drop a hint, in confidence, to Mr. Jewell. Then he'll tell Mrs. Jewell, and then . . . well, then everyone'll know."

"A penny for your thoughts, Jim!" It was Lucy, who mischievously touched his elbow and whispered. This Mohun business, with its air of a shady conspiracy, offended his sensitiveness as, once before, in another and deeper degree, it had been offended by his mother's relation with Dr. Fosdyke. Both these situations were what people called love-affairs, and both revolted him. He resented the word. Whatever else it might be, he told himself, the love he believed in, that airy delicate ecstasy, wasn't like these. And he couldn't explain it to Lucy, anyway. . . .

"As a matter of fact," she was saying, "you needn't tell me. She's gone. I saw them leave the field half an hour ago. And you might just as well think of getting the moon as her, Jim, my dear," she said softly.

V. *Grecian Urn*

THE moon? It was true; yet why should that cruel metaphor disturb him? There was Endymion. . . .

At Winchester, through the torrid remnant of that summer term, when his imminent departure from the old, settled life and the threat of an incalculable future made all life fluent, Jim dwelt, a ghost, a changeling (unless it were the familiar world, not he, that had changed) as remote as though the green valley of Itchen were the flank of Latmos, and the sun that mellowed the cathedral's stones enchanted moonshine. His days were not conscious life but a long, waking dream, a period in which the mere process of existence became poetry; when every beauty that entered his soul by way of sound or sight was enriched by a sweetness well-nigh intolerable, shed on it from the overplus of emotion within him. A light that never was on land nor sea illumined everything. His imagination—that precious yet doubtful legacy of George Redlake's which, hitherto, had shown no activity less vague than the secret stir of sap in a green bough, awakened to a tempestuous splendour of premature bloom. Not only did he now read poetry more greedily than ever (and the luscious couplets of "Endymion" were a subtle lotus) but he began to write it, or rather to imagine it, since the lovely phrases and images that fluttered out of the dark to warm their rich glooms and sheens at the glow of his brain's incandescence were as fugitive as moths and, once captured, seemed poor broken things from whose wings the bloom had gone. Even so, the margins and flyleaves of the books which he read, and particularly those of the Catullus that he kept under his pillow, were scribbled with phrases caught, as it were, on the wing, yet stale and depressing at dawn as the fragments of a midnight banquet.

Though the thought of her filled his days, or rather infused them as an impalpable influence sweetening the springs of life, it was in the awaited luxury of sleepless nights, when material sights and sounds were subdued, that, like Endymion, he perceived Cynthia's form most clearly. Then, at times, he could even see the blue of her eyes and that delicate shape, which Keats, in the poem that obsessed him, had clothed with one magic line: those *"valley-lilies whiter still than Leda's love."* At these moments his brain would become a lighted theatre for heroic scenes in which, miraculously emboldened, he gave speech to words that might never be spoken and was ravished by her soft replies. These ecstasies seemed rarer for the fact that they were so secret. Not one of his friends had any suspicion of them. If Julian rallied him, as he sometimes would, on his moodiness, he would pass off the impeachment with a joke whose naturalness gave him a sensation of pride in his own extraordinary cunning. And, of course, the last person in the world to suspect the state of his feelings was Cynthia herself.

He had no reason to suppose that she had ever regarded him as more than an escort casually honoured with some minutes of her company. Her promise of another meeting at Thorpe was a mere gesture of social politeness. The azure flames by which his soul had been dazzled were as impartial as a beam of sunlight. The words they had exchanged—now so fervently remembered—had been sheerest commonplace. Yet these considerations, which might have chilled a maturer lover, made no difference to Jim; they even added to his adoration Platonic flavour.

For though Cynthia's physical beauty—enhanced perhaps by the aura of distinction with which Mrs. Weston's legend enveloped the Essendine name—was the mainspring of his passion, he was as little aware as yet of any physical desire for her as for the moon to which Lucy had so cruelly compared her. In those days the least suggestion of the physical in regard to Cynthia or himself would have filled him with the sense of disgust and degradation which he had felt so keenly in the case of his mother and, on an even lower plane, in that of Aunt Margaret. It was enough for him to know that such beauty as Cynthia's existed; to find, in her image, a symbol and summary of all other haunting beauty: the colour of clouds and sunsets, the ache of music, the enchantment of words. He asked nothing of Cynthia—nothing but that she should exist; craved no possession but that of his secret imaginings; was willing, nay, eager to demand nothing, to give all. He knew much of the tenderness of love; nothing of its cruelty. It was a passion refined to the utmost degree of purity; very lovely, like all young love, and, like all young love, rather pitiful.

Not that Jim regarded himself as an object for pity. He was, on the contrary, the subject of a unique experience, and proud as Satan. He envied nobody in the world—not even Julian, whose acquaintance with the tender passion, once so impressive, seemed now, by comparison, a little sordid. The state which Julian had decried as moodiness was, in fact, a serene and confident rapture in which, like some devotee in a cloister, he patiently suffered the circumstances of common life in the sure hope of that Paradise which awaited him at the moment of his next meeting with Cynthia.

When that moment would come was still a matter of uncertainty; in a vague way he had fixed its time for the first week in August—"after Cowes" she had said. At present, he supposed, she was in town, enjoying the excitements of her first London season; so that when Julian invited Jim to spend a few days with him on his way to the Midlands, he eagerly clutched at this chance of an earlier glimpse of her.

"Are we likely to meet the Folvilles?" he asked with an air of casual innocence.

"I dare say," said Julian carelessly. "We can't help meeting dozens of people. Everybody's in town just now. More fools they, at a time when the country's quite at its best! I should think you'll see more than enough of the Folvilles at Thorpe later on," he added contemptuously.

It was with the sensation of a pilgrim entering Mecca that Jim inhaled the sacred London air. There was no knowing at what moment he might not see her; yet even this anticipation was drowned in the excitement of visiting, for the first time, the Hintons' house in Berkeley Square.

It was a thin, high-shouldered building, with the pallid aloofness of a powdered Georgian spinster painted by Zoffany, and an aristocratic air of primly withdrawing itself from the contact of those distinguished neighbours who shared with it the kempt amenities of the gardens; so reserved, indeed, that until a Du Maurier butler swung open the door with the precision of French clockwork, it gave the impression of being quite uninhabited and preserved as a museum piece to record the graces of a more elegant age. The floors within were so densely carpeted, and the walls so shrouded in sound-muffling tapestries, that Jim moved as though on tiptoe, and instinctively lowered his voice for fear of lacerating the place's velvety silence.

As they climbed the stairs to the bedroom which had been allotted to him he realised of a sudden that this house was enough to account for the qualities which he most admired, but could never emulate, in Julian: that air of essential refinement in body and mind, so luxurious, yet scornful of luxury; so urbane, yet coldly ascetic; so rich, and yet so austere, which made the born aristocrat—as typified by Alec Folville or others of his Winchester friends—seem comparatively clumsy and Philistine. Whereas the Folvilles had been reared in an ambience of beautiful things—amid family portraits, for instance, that ranged from Holbein to Sargent—these objects of art had been accumulated almost haphazard as part of the family's traditional domestic environment, and were regarded by them quite as much as a matter of course as the famous Thorpe Castle gardens, laid out by Lenôtre, or the stables which traced their descent, through Eclipse, from the Darley Arabian.

Julian's father, on the other hand, was the third of a line of bankers whose fortune had sprung from the "graft" of the Napoleonic wars. Neither the first nor the second Hinton had concerned himself with any activity but the making of money. Untempted by the romance of social or political adventure, they had stuck to their swelling ledgers, buying pictures or statues or furniture not, as the Folvilles did, because it was natural to them, nor even to enrich their lives, but simply as investments. Marcus Hinton the third, Julian's father, had been the first of the family to realise the æsthetic potentiality of their enormous wealth. To an inherited financial acumen he united a genuine, if unelastic, love of the fine arts; and this, together with unlimited means for indulging his flair for the exquisite (which included the wife who had died at Julian's birth), had surrounded the childhood of Jim's friend with examples of a taste so impeccable that an instinctive dislike of the second-rate became part of his nature. That Julian should have been born with a golden spoon in his mouth was unimportant compared with the fact that he was bred with a Gainsborough in the nursery; and the circumstance that everything in his life—including his bath-water—had been softened by money was only significant in that this birthright included the amenities of a unique library, a string quartet, and a dining-table at which the most brilliant tongues of the age were happy to talk without competition.

It was the spiritual atmosphere of the Hintons' house that impressed Jim as much as its incredible physical comforts. Hitherto he had been inclined, thanks largely to his grandmother, to accept the standards of the hunting aristocracy as an ideal to which not even Julian might aspire. This visit to Berkeley Square rather muddled his values, revealing the fact that there was more than one kind of aristocracy; and though Julian's father, whose name Mrs. Weston apparently had never heard, lacked the glamour of inherited prestige that clothed Lord Essendine *cap-à-pie* in figurative mail and enriched Cynthia's perfect profile with memories of so much dead loveliness, there was something impressive in the ease with which his sheer wealth could hold genius and beauty and even the pride of race at his beck and call.

What impressed Jim even more, when they dined *en famille* that evening, was Marcus Hinton's simplicity. No one, meeting him casually, would have dreamed him the wielder of millions. The dark, velvet-jacketed figure that detached itself from the amber shade of the library, which seemed lit by a subdued radiance of gilt-lettered calf and moonlike vellum, was that of a pale-faced man, not nearly so tall as Julian and far less imposing, of course, than the Du Maurier butler by whose condescension they were shortly invited to dinner. At that excellent meal Marcus Hinton ate sparingly and drank no wine, in contrast with Jim and Julian who, freed from their spartan fare at school, made the most of the admirable food and a bottle of Steinberg Auslese by the aid of which Jim was enabled to regard Page, the butler, with rapidly decreasing awe.

Julian's father spoke seldom, in a voice unbelievably quiet; yet somehow, between him and Julian, there seemed little need for speech, so identically were both minds informed by the influence of their choice surroundings. To Jim, on the other hand, with whom he had so little in common, the banker was most polite, asking him questions about small things at Winchester (he, too, was a Wykehamist) and listening to his replies with a grave flicker of a smile so far from critical that it made him—unless it were the hock?—feel a guest of honour.

"Are you interested in pictures at all?" he asked when the meal was over. And when Jim had explained, with some brilliance, he felt, that he was, but that, honestly, he knew very little about them, he took him by the arm and showed him some of his treasures: two genre paintings of Metsu, a windy landscape of Ruysdael, and then a more recent acquisition, a picture of bathers by Renoir.

"Just a little too easy: Boucher at Port Aven. Don't you think so?" he murmured as he gazed at the last. But he didn't await or even expect a reply. Not only his eyes, which were dark like Julian's, but the whole of his being, seemed transfigured by a gentle glow of the richest content; and Jim knew that he wasn't really showing these pictures to an ignorant guest, but savouring their remembered fragrance as he might have inhaled the bouquet of a fine Latour. As he wandered from room to room, with one hand on Jim's arm, his fingers were forever caressing the objects that he loved, and Jim, seeing them, suddenly knew that this small, sleek figure with the pale groping hands who crept silently beside him was just like a velvety mole.

"Pretty, isn't it?" he said, as he paused for one moment to gaze at a slender vase, which rose, like the bloom of some dark water-flower, from a polished table-top of black Algerian marble. "Fifth century. . . . A Nolan vase."

"Nolan?" Jim asked.

"Yes. Nola, the place where it was found, was a Greek settlement, a small town at the foot of the Apennines, just behind Naples."

"Is this really . . . a Grecian Urn?"

"Not exactly an urn. An amphora. Slim amphoræ they generally call them. It's signed, you know. *Euxetheus painted me.* Of course you can read Greek? No, no, my dear boy, if you want to realize how perfect it is you must *feel* it. All three-dimensional things must be touched and fingered before you know what they really are. That shape! (Attic shape, Jim thought . . .) That glaze like a polished onyx, yet so much softer!"

Jim lifted the vase and handled it reverently. Suppose it should slip through his fingers! On that surface, so smooth that it seemed more like a bloom than a glaze, he saw a single red figure, reflected rather than painted: a female figure caught for one moment, for ever, in an attitude of unbelievable lightness and gaiety, like a butterfly on the wing.

"An Oread, a mountain-nymph," Marcus Hinton was saying. "I call her Echo."

But Jim knew that her name was not Echo. That brow, sweeping slightly backward with its suggestion of speed and impulsiveness; that nose, which carried the unbroken line of the forehead so cleanly downward; those proud, soft lips. . . . Her name was not Echo; her name was Cynthia. So, as he gazed, still aware of the glow of love that radiated from the man beside him, words lovely as the painted image stole sadly, sweetly, through his brain:

> *Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss*
> *Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;*
> *She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,*
> *Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair!*

Aroused from this dream he heard himself asking: "Who was Cynthia, sir?"

"Cynthia?"

"She was Greek too, wasn't she?"

"Of course. The Delian Diana. Diana Cynthia was worshipped on Mount Cynthus, near Delos. No, let me put it down for you."

And he did so, with an infinite, loving carefulness, leaving Jim, still rapt, to discover a moment later that he had faded away without another word.

"The guv'nor is always like that," Julian told him cheerfully. "He's a queer old bird; you never know when you've got him. Of course, he works like a slave; there's no banker in London who gets through so much as he does; yet he knows all his pictures and vases and things by heart; he reads everything, knows everybody worth knowing, travels all over the earth. I'm damned if I know where he finds the time for it all. I think he must absorb it from the air, like an insect that breathes through its skin. *I* couldn't, I'm quite sure of that." He laughed, light-heartedly. "Look here, Jim, let's just dodge along to the Alhambra and hear George Robey. We needn't bother about the carriage; it's a ripping evening."

A splendid idea, Jim thought. As they turned together into Berkeley Street he reflected how changed was the world since that unhappy night on which he had walked to Soho with his mother and her friend Dr. Fosdyke. For a moment the contrast between her dingy lodging at the back of Wimpole Street and the luxuries of the house he had just left pricked his conscience. After all, she was his mother; it seemed mean that he should spend three days in London without attempting to see her. Nor did he feel quite so hardly toward her now. His joy in the discovery of Cynthia had softened that last bitter memory.

Yet the difference between his surroundings and hers, the gulf betwixt Mayfair and Bayswater, seemed so wide that by the time they had reached Piccadilly his cowardice had found courage to dismiss her from his mind. The sense of his own elegance and Julian's was even more intoxicant than the ebbing fumes of the Steinberg. This gay world of high lights and dazzling diversions, in which life ran on smoothly-oiled wheels, and money or the means of finding it need never be thought of, was the sphere to which, by nature if not by right, he belonged. If only because it was that which Cynthia inhabited it must surely be his; and though, for the moment, he had only entered it on sufferance and by favour of his friendship with Julian, he must cling to the blessed illusion of possessing it as long as it lasted.

By the time that they reached the Circus, where the odorous baskets of patient flower-women lay heaped like votive offerings round the plinth of the statue of Eros, poised delicately in an orange dusk above these central courts of his worship, all qualms of doubt or conscience had vanished from his mind. On the pavement that faced the Pavilion a number of women raised painted masks to smile at him and Julian, scenting in their careless elegance the possible prey of two very young "nobs" on the spree. Jim found himself smiling back at them, for no real reason. His mind and body were as immune from their sorry lures as the bronze Eros high-lifted above the hurrying multitude.

One face and one only possessed him, to the exclusion even of that arch, monstrously high-browed countenance, above the tight clerical coat, and beneath the ridiculous bowler, which mouthed and grimaced on the Alhambra's limelit stage. That face he sought eagerly among the hundreds of pale, smiling discs upturned in the stalls; again, with diminished hope, beneath lamps that enriched the plane-trees of Leicester Square with an unnatural greenness, and later, as they made their way homeward, in the unlighted depths of electric broughams that rolled silently past them with their shadowy, delicate freights of rich furs and tissues, white shoulders and smouldering jewels. It haunted the thick-carpeted silence in which he climbed to his bedroom; and later, as the subdued roar of traffic lulled him to sleep, he found exquisite, illogical comfort in the thought that in Grosvenor Square, a bare quarter of a mile away, Cynthia Folville was breathing the air that he breathed, and hearing, as he heard, the town's hushed bourdon. He slept, poor Endymion, unvisited by any dream.

"I shall have to desert you this afternoon," Julian told him as they were riding in Rotten Row next morning. "I've promised to play racquets with a fellow at Prince's. You'll find plenty to see in the house with pictures and books and things, and the guv'nor will be back to tea in the library at five. Lots of painters and writers and queer people of that sort roll up to see him about that time, so he's sure to be in. He's taken to you, by the way. I think you must have touched his soft side over that amphora."

"I'm longing to see it again," Jim told him. He was far too shy to say why; but that afternoon, in the Trappist hush of the library, which seemed vowed to perpetual silence save when it was startled by the silvery chime of a Marot clock like the mocking laugh of some powdered, paniered lady, Jim paid his devotions to that austerer beauty. The room was very dark that day, with the ink of a brewing thunderstorm blackening the sky. This time, without Marcus Hinton standing at his elbow, he did not dare to lift the vase in his fingers. He knelt, instead, at the table, with his eyes on the level of the amphora, gazing stedfastly at that peerless shape of a dusky lotus dimly rising from its black pool of marble. In this attitude, which symbolized unconsciously a double devotion, for the dead beauty of the vase itself and that of the living girl whose form its painter had foreshadowed, he became lost in a curious rapture of a kind familiar to crystal-gazers, in which the planes of sight were confused, and it seemed as if the painted figure were about to be freed from the thin glaze that imprisoned it and to float, an embodied phantom, before his desirous eyes.

From this rapt state he was aroused by the sudden opening of the library door, through which Page, the tall butler, introduced, unannounced, a new visitor. Ashamed of his posture Jim quickly rose to his feet; but the new-comer, whoever he might be, had apparently failed to notice him, for after a careful glance at an Adam mirror above the mantel-piece, he moved with long strides to the other end of the room, where he stood gazing out of the window with his back turned on Jim, so completely unaware or contemptuous of his presence that the boy did not know what to do.

He was a tall man, rather high-shouldered, with a scholarly stoop and grey hair too long for fashion in contrast with his pearl-grey spats and a morning-coat which defined an elegant waist. He stood like a paper-cut silhouette against the blue-black thunder-cloud, his thumbs thrust into two waistcoat pockets contemplatively, his head thrown back, as though his eyes searched the threatening sky. Then he yawned a prodigiously noisy yawn and picked up a book from the window-table. Apparently it interested him or started some new thread of thought; for he immediately took out a pencil and made notes with it on his left shirt-cuff.

By this time the situation had become embarrassing. If Jim announced his presence he felt that he might interrupt the distinguished visitor's train of thought; if he didn't, on the other hand, he was clearly an eavesdropper: a dilemma from which he was rescued by Julian's father, who suddenly appeared, as quietly as if the spirit of the room had materialized in his person.

"How nice of you!" he said, advancing toward the visitor. "I'm so glad you've come."

"I took you at your word," the other replied. "This room is quite lovely," he went on, though Jim knew quite well that he had never looked at anything in it but the mirror and the book.

"Yes, it *is* rather nice. Let us have some tea," said Marcus Hinton, and, as he turned to ring, became aware of Jim's presence. "Hello, young man, are you here?" he said, "I didn't see you." Then he gave a low chuckle of amusement. "This family reunion is rather extraordinary, isn't it?"

He smiled at the tall visitor, who evidently missed the point as completely as Jim. "Well, what do you think of him, Redlake?" he went on.

Jim thought that the astonishing question was addressed to him. To his surprise it was answered by the stranger.

"The room was so dark," he said, "that *I* didn't see him either. Your son, I suppose?"

"No. Yours." Marcus Hinton smiled.

"*Mine* . . . ?" said George Redlake.

"Yes. Jim. . . . Come and show yourself, Jim. He's a great friend of my boy's, you know."

Even for such a master of situation as George Redlake this one was embarrassing.

"Is this a conspiracy, Hinton?" he asked, with an incredulous smile.

"No, not in the least," Marcus Hinton laughed. "I'd no idea you were coming this afternoon. You know that yourself." And he looked from one to the other with quizzical amusement.

By this time George Redlake had recovered himself. He advanced from the window and held out his hand to Jim.

"How d'you do?" he said.

"Very well, thank you, sir," said Jim, shaking hands with his father.

"So much for the *cri du sang* that French dramatists are so fond of," said Marcus Hinton with a short laugh. "You don't recognise him even now?"

"We've not met for . . . how many years?—ten, isn't it, Jim? I last saw him in knickerbockers. Naturally, he's considerably changed."

But George Redlake, as a matter of fact, had changed even more considerably. It was impossible for Jim to recognize in this urbanely exquisite man-about-town, the shabby, tempestuous, bearded figure whose presence had shadowed his childhood at Sedgebury like a flying thunder-cloud. Ten years of renown and prosperity had acted as a depilatory on George Redlake. His shaggy brown beard and moustaches had vanished—probably because his hair had gone grey, and the aspect of a major prophet to which, as a man of letters, he aspired, was hardly, in a physical sense, fitting to one who was still described as a "Younger Novelist." That hair which, as Jim remembered, he had been wont to toss wildly from his brows like an angry Highland bull, now retreated discreetly and smoothly from an expanse of forehead that seemed almost benevolent; while his passionate mouth, once the vehicle of so fierce and calculated a bitterness, was now set in a line of firm and judicial wisdom—the mouth of a man who knows that his words are listened to without need for emphasis. It was only in his eyes, whose fires were now modified by a pair of rimless *pince-nez*, and in the height of the prepotent, loose-limbed figure which impended over him, that Jim could find any resemblance to the man whose moods he had dreaded. Those eyes, even now, appeared to regard him with jealous surprise, as a reminder of a condition of life that was best forgotten. "What the devil are *you* doing in a house like this?" they seemed to demand.

But Jim, when once the first shock of the encounter was over, did not see his father; he only saw George Redlake, the writer of genius, whose works, so fervently admired, had such strange affinities with his own dreams. It was the thought of these works incarnate rather than of the man himself—who appeared, if not hostile to his presence, at least embarrassed by it—which threw him immediately into an attitude of such reverence that it never occurred to him to presume on their relationship by any familiarity.

This instinctive humility on the part of his long-lost son encouraged George Redlake. He had collaborated in Jim, so to speak, at the time when he had written those unfortunate romantic books (which he fully intended to suppress in the Collected Edition) and strongly resented being reminded of the bad period which had produced them. He was no longer an unrecognized genius and therefore bitterly rebellious, but a pundit, universally acknowledged and flattered. The polite world which he had affected to scorn now knelt at his feet. On those conditions he had taken his place in it as a distinguished social figure, the friend of bankers and duchesses: one of the few men of letters—perhaps the only one—whose manners and person were as polished as his style, a fact that was vouched for, if proof were needed, by his presence in Marcus Hinton's library that afternoon. It was a matter of personal pride with him never to say the wrong thing; to deal easily with every possibly social emergency. Virtuosity of this kind was called for in the present situation; the twinkle of amused anticipation in his host's eyes demanded a *tour de force*. He achieved it magnificently.

"This is really a surprise," he admitted. "How is your mother?"

"Oh, very well, thank you, sir—or at least she was when I last saw her," Jim answered.

"You don't often see her?" George Redlake inquired solicitously.

"No, not very often."

"Where are you living now? In London?"

"I'm still at Thorpe Folville."

"Ah yes, at Thorpe Folville." George Redlake's eyes hardened for a moment. Perhaps the name of the place had some unflattering associations. Fortunately there were others. "That reminds me," he said, "I must write to Lady Essendine."

"Of course I'm at Winchester with Julian most of the time," Jim explained.

"But how wise of you!" The remark was addressed not to Jim but to Marcus Hinton. "How wise of you to send your boy to Winchester rather than to Eton. It's so much more civilized; there's a certain—how shall I say?—patina . . ."

"I sent him to Winchester because I was there myself," Marcus Hinton said quietly.

"Well, you *see* . . ." George Redlake smiled and bowed courteously. "What was I saying?" And, once having laid his small tribute at the foot of the domestic cenotaph, he continued to speak exactly as though Jim were not present, or rather as though he were present through some strange and slightly regrettable accident in a capacity similar to that of Page, the butler, whose fragrant Keemun he sipped as he talked in a language that only himself and his host could be expected to understand.

He talked of books and of the state of the modern novel. George Redlake had by now attained a degree of celebrity that permitted him to be generous, even enthusiastic, in patronizing the work of a number of young novelists; to compare them, much to their advantage and, of course, reluctantly, with those of his contemporaries who happened to compete with his own reputation. They had certain crudities; but that was natural enough. Even he was ashamed at times of the work of his nonage. Still, as Mr. Hinton knew, he had always been something of a rebel. He was prepared, in short (though he didn't put it like that), to carry the standard of revolt in a dignified manner provided it was plainly understood that nobody else had a right to it; to be the advocate of unrecognized youth to the exact point at which youth came to be recognized. That afternoon he was as cheerful about the near future of English letters as once he had been dispirited. How could anything be wrong, he implied, with a world in which a writer who had shunned publicity as strenuously as he had, was the intimate friend of the numerous august and distinguished people whose names, mentioned casually, flamed like frequent rubrics in his delightful monologue—such names, his discreet familiarity suggested, as that of Marcus Hinton himself?

Jim listened, so enthralled by this display, that the hour passed like lightning. It didn't strike him for an instant that his father's conversation resembled, on a slightly different plane, that of his grandmother. On the contrary, at that moment he felt extremely proud of his father as a man of genius who had succeeded, by his own showing, in making the best of all possible worlds and providing an example for his own emulation. He was convinced, more than ever, that his mother and his grandparents had done his father an injustice. He too, he told himself, might some day become a greater writer, a poet for preference; the verses inspired by Cynthia were only a beginning; he too would wear pearl-grey spats and a cutaway coat, and pontificate in great bankers' libraries with his thumbs in his waistcoat pocket; he too would let slip, in a casual way, the fact that he had dined last week with the Lord Chief Justice; he too would generously proclaim himself the advocate of youth!

But, by this time the eyes of Marcus Hinton were becoming distrait; his attention was wandering a little uneasily in the direction of his study, where he had an appointment to keep with a puzzling still-life by a man named Van Gogh. George Redlake, whose social sensitiveness was more highly developed than Jim's, quickly noticed his host's abstraction and diverted his peroration into a tactful withdrawal.

"Must you really go?" Marcus Hinton suggested charmingly; and Jim hoped that his father would defer to the supplication, which amounted, in fact, to a plea for his departure. George Redlake, being wiser, immediately rose to his feet.

"You've reminded me of the letter I owe Lady Essendine," he said. "I shall find myself in terribly hot water if I don't go and write it. It was charming of you to ask me to call in informally like this.

May I come again, some day? I've heard so much of your wonderful pictures."

For a moment the temptation of showing his treasures struggled with the lure of solitude in Marcus Hinton's mind. Steeled by the thought of the waiting Van Gogh he resisted it.

"Of course, I should love to show them to you," he said. "Any day about five. Good-bye, Redlake. So nice to have seen you."

To Jim's horror, it almost seemed as if his father were going to leave without saying good-bye to him. It was only at the last possible moment that George Redlake appeared to remember his presence; but the smile of apparent friendliness with which he held out his hand restored Jim's wavering enthusiasm.

"Good-bye," he said briskly. "Remember me to your mother. My address, by the way . . ." He fumbled for a card in his elegant waistcoat, then, envisaging, as it seemed, the complication of a potential nuisance or compelled by a warning impatience in the eyes of his host: "As a matter of fact," he said, "you'll find it in the telephone directory." And with another grimace of respect towards Marcus Hinton he was gone.

"Well, Jim . . . ?" Julian's father asked, with a quizzical smile.

"I should never have known him, sir. It's ten years since I saw him. It was awful good luck for me, wasn't it?"

"He writes admirable prose," said the banker enigmatically. But before Jim could guess what exactly he meant by that he had faded away.

VI. *Interim*

IT WAS some consolation for Jim to know that the train which whirled northward from St. Pancras and away from her was actually carrying him toward the scene of his next meeting with Cynthia. That scene, as he surveyed it from the box of the dogcart, on the way home from Melton, seemed strangely contracted. His imagination had taken so high a flight that, as he dropped unwillingly earthwards, the flattened fields appeared less spacious, the lanes narrower, and the snug houses of Thorpe Folville, including the Grange itself, astonishingly small and undistinguished.

He found the Weston household in a state of violent excitement. Aunt Margaret's engagement to Captain Mohun had just been announced, though whether the news of his fate had been broken to the victim through the agency of Mrs. Jewell or by Margaret herself was not disclosed. That hardly mattered in any case. Mrs. Weston had won her Waterloo on the Fields where Waterloos are supposed to be won, so that she could afford to discount the minor, tactical defeat which she suffered at the hands of that old campaigner Mrs. Jewell when she announced the news of the Essendines' projected return.

"So *that's* leaked out has it?" Mrs. Jewell had said, with a careless air of having been sitting on the secret for months and being relieved to know that it had hatched. "They *hate* to be talked about, you know"; and then she went on maliciously: "How thankful we all are to feel that dear Margaret's affair is settled . . . after all!"

The sting of the congratulation lay in its innocent tail; but Mrs. Weston was far too busy to answer. Poor Mrs. Jewell hadn't even a daughter to be thankful over! All the womenfolk at the Grange, the marmoset and Lucy included, were so engrossed in preparations for the wedding, whose date Mrs. Weston was pushing on with a speed that offered an obvious target for Mrs. Jewell's malice, that Jim, providentially, was left very much to himself.

Now that the time of his meeting with Cynthia approached he could not settle to anything. He could not read without her image intruding between him and the page. Wherever he walked or rode his heart was stabbed with reminders of her existence. Indeed, he actually courted these pains by making pilgrimages to the gap in the hedge through which he had been shot, with such loss of dignity, into her life; by ambling dreamily homeward over the fields where they had ridden together, or climbing to that high corner of the paddock from which the towers and battlements of Thorpe Castle might be seen. Even before he was thoroughly awake, the scream of the Castle peacocks brought her to mind, and when he closed his eyes at night the quiet sky seemed lit by the tawny reflex of London, and the subdued roar of traffic which she heard invaded his ears.

In this restless state he longed for a confidant, yet could think of none, save Miss Minnet or the contemptuous Lucy, and dared speak to neither for fear of being shown his own foolishness. So, while the countryside plunged into its annual rainy debauch of garden-parties, picnics and tennis, through which Aunt Margaret, who was quite abominably on top of herself, paraded the spoils of conquest in the shape of a sapphire solitaire which she had wrested from poor Captain Mohun, and Lucy, inspired by her aunt's success, engaged in a mild—but *so* mild!—flirtation with Mr. Holly, and Mr. Jewell trotted out his old blazer and cried "Yours, partner!" and Mrs. Weston moved figuratively emblazoned with the Mohuns' cross engrailed, Jim played his part with the air of Byronic detachment that he had borrowed from Julian, so successfully that even Doctor Weston noticed the change in him.

"You're not looking well, Jim," he said. "I'll put up a tonic for you." "I know what's the matter with Jim," said Lucy cruelly, and left it at that.

"He must be in love," Aunt Margaret gushed. "Who is it, Jim? I expect it's that Malthus girl, the pretty one. What's her name? Catherine?"

"No, thank you, Aunt Margaret. There's nothing whatever the matter with me."

Love. . . . What did they know of love, those two? Captain Mohun? Mr. Holly? The association of such names with the word love revolted him. And as for the Malthus girls. . . .

Well, strangely enough, he had spent more time lately at Cold

Orton Vicarage than anywhere else, and Catherine and Cecilia (to say nothing of Bridget) were certainly pretty enough if you judged them by standards less severe than that set by Cynthia. It was curious, this instinctive preference of Jim's for the Malthus household. He had been drawn to them really, he supposed, by the fact that they seemed so happy. They asked less of life than their neighbours, and therefore were never bored; their interests were so lively and self-contained that they had no need to indulge in that gossip which was Mrs. Jewell's staple industry and Mr. Holly's snickering diversion; and now that the whole brood were at home for the summer holidays—the boys just returned from the second-rate public-schools from which Mr. Malthus's coaching had scraped them bursaries and scholarships—the Vicarage offered Jim a taste of that family life which he had never experienced, and therefore rather envied.

The girls too, were so accustomed to the masculine vagaries of their own brothers, that they neither threw themselves at Jim in the effusive manner of Aunt Margaret, nor, like Lucy, withdrew into the arch defences of feminine privilege. They were perfectly natural and frank, and transparent as spring-water—as who would not be in those cold, clean, sweet surroundings? They were jolly without being boisterous, well-behaved but not stiff; they were serious, too, in a gentle, virginal way that somehow reminded Jim of Tennyson's poetry. Particularly Catherine, a tall, fair girl, very slim, with something of Cynthia's colouring but not an atom of Cynthia's devastating physical brilliance. Catherine's hair caught the light less than Cynthia's; her cheeks quickly flushed and paled with each change of emotion, whereas Cynthia's, whatever she felt, if she felt at all, kept the same mild, golden radiance that transfused her whole body. Though Mr. Malthus's love embraced all of them, Catherine was his chosen companion, an accessory to her mother, who was far too busy to give the Vicar his due. Catherine acted as choir-mistress; she played the organ in church and the tired—and so appropriately upright—piano in the vicarage drawing-room; and though she had never heard of Wagner—not even of Parsifal—she was genuinely sensitive to the sweet, formal graces of Haydn and Mozart and the gay "little" Bach of the suites that her father loved. Like all the rest of the family she had scanty leisure, and when she came to it, her duties behind her, she brought with her the air of a child on a holiday.

Indeed, all those lives at Cold Orton were so full of direction and discipline that Jim began to feel ashamed of his own life and Julian's. Julian Hinton, of course, had been born an amateur; what was more, he could afford to live that sort of life, though probably he was marked for a brilliant career in politics. But Jim, as he knew when he faced it, had no prospects of that kind, and the first person to bring him to earth was Catherine Malthus. One evening when they two had stood out from a set of tennis and were walking together through the Vicarage orchard, she questioned him, in her serious way, about his future.

"My future?" He laughed. The only future he cared about now was Cynthia. "What do you mean, Catherine?" he said.

"I mean . . . what are you going to do?"

"I really don't know."

"But you *ought* to know, Jim. Our boys know exactly what they want. You see Paul, who's at Keble, will be ordained next year, and Christopher's just working like a nigger at the School of Mines, and Mark's really quite clever, so I'm almost sure he'll get into the Woods and Forests, if father can afford it. But *you* . . ."

"Well, I'm going to Oxford, I suppose. Isn't that enough to go on with."

"Is it?" she enquired, so doubtfully that her question prolonged itself into the silence that followed. He liked Catherine's quiet voice. Though its tones didn't thrill him, as Cynthia's did even in memory, they had a haunting gentleness. It was jolly, he thought, to be strolling along like this on a summer evening through an orchard strewn with late hay in the company of such a candid sensible creature as Catherine, a girl, and a pretty girl too, with whom one need never dread any complications of sentiment. It was flattering to know that his future interested her, and fortunate, too, that she had spoken of it, for a few days later his grandfather broached the same subject, and Jim, who had thought the matter over, was ready to answer him.

"I've been wondering," the old man said, "if you'd like to take up medicine. The idea has its *pros* and *cons* like everything else. Let's take the *pros* first. To begin with,—though this one's entirely personal—I'd like you to do so. I'm not so young as I was, Jim, and in a little time I shall be very glad of your help. Then again—you're not likely to find such an easy opening in anything else; this practice is as good, of its kind, as it can be; I've made it myself; I dislike the idea of its passing into some stranger's hands when I'm finished with. Besides, you'll get it for nothing. There's a third reason—one I won't press because you're young and it probably won't appeal to you—and that is that a doctor who does his job well has the satisfaction of being more use to the world than most other people. Than the parsons, for instance. Of course there are exceptions like Malthus—I'm glad you're still friends with him—but most of them live on folks' sins, just as lawyers live on their quarrels. A good doctor, whether he fails or succeeds, is the salt of this earth. And that brings me to the *cons* . . . As a matter of fact, Jim, there's only one *con*, which is this: a man who becomes a doctor against his inclination or doesn't realize that doctoring's a life-work makes a bad one; and a bad doctor, you may take it from me, for I've known some, is a hundred times more despicable than a bad parson or a shady lawyer. A bad doctor betrays a trust that's far more important, in my opinion, than religion or money. Well, what do you say to it? I know you'll be quite honest with me."

What could he say? There was nobody in the world whose feelings Jim was so loth to wound as Doctor Weston's. He knew that the shape of his present life was due to him, his small triumphs watched with satisfaction and pride, his small failures excused by that wide and charitable love; but he knew quite as well that he couldn't be a doctor—not only because he had not the vocation which his grandfather considered so important, but because he was a snob, and the status of a country practitioner, however spiritually dignified, must cut at the roots of his aspirations to Cynthia. Doctor Weston had asked him to be honest. He couldn't be wholly honest without showing him the bottom of his heart and being told what, in sober moments, he knew already, how vain and extravagant his pretensions were.

"I'm afraid I should never make a good doctor," he said. "It just isn't in me."

"Well, what *is* in you, Jim?" the old man smiled.

"I don't know, grandpapa," he said. "Not much, I'm afraid."

"You'd come to it, Jim. It would get you before long. It's not a bad life. There's no end to the interest of it. The rewards aren't just to be measured in money, either. It's one of the few jobs in which you get definite results. There's a man I shall see this morning, a farm-labourer with six children: a case of strangulated hernia on which I operated ten days ago. Now, but for a bit of luck and the edge of my bistoury, his wife would have been a widow and the children in the workhouse to-day. When I see that chap smile, I thank God I'm a doctor, Jim. It makes you feel humble, and, at the same time, extraordinarily proud."

"Yes, that must be quite wonderful, I know." Why couldn't he speak the truth. The truth was as unworthy as it was utterly fantastic. He was silent, and in that silence, aware of the doctor's deep disappointment; yet, however deeply he may have felt, the old man was not going to show it. He was far too good a sportsman to flinch at cutting his losses.

"Well, I'm not going to drive you," he said. "You may yet come round to it. Still, it's time to be thinking of something definite. Tell me, what do you want to do?"

"Julian's going to Oxford next term. He's down for New College."

"H'm . . . Oxford. I shouldn't choose that as a medical school. If you thought of being a parson—which I hope to God you don't, though I don't suppose there's much danger of that—Oxford might be all very well. If you did go there, what would you do?"

"I suppose I should take a degree."

"A degree? In what? Arts? Like our good friends Jewell and Holly? And then, when you've taken it, start all over again—unless you go in for school-mastering or something of that kind? That's a blind alley, Jim! I shouldn't like to see you in that. Though I'm not a poor man, I shan't be able to leave you a fortune."

"I can't bear you to talk of such things."

"Well, well, we won't talk of them then. But I wish you could tell me . . ."

"I think I should like to write."

"To write? I really don't know very much about that. But unless a man's a big man, Jim, I imagine it's a poor sort of game; and most writers I've known have been pretty poor sort of people. Whyte Melville was a sportsman all right; but then, he had money to start with. What makes you think you could write? Have you written anything?"

"A little." He could hardly confess to what he had written, those hot verses inspired by Cynthia which, in moments of exaltation, had seemed so fine. But the doctor, apparently, had no intention of exploring a country so unfamiliar.

The figure of the seedy, underfed, unsuccessful man of letters was firmly established as a type in his downright mind. He enlarged on it with unusual eloquence. "Is that what you want to be?"

Jim spoke of his father—with some timidity, for he knew that George Redlake was deeply imbedded in the doctor's prejudices. He admitted that he had encountered George Redlake at the Hintons' house, as though that, of itself, were an earnest of some distinction. However much Mrs. Weston might have been impressed by this circumstance, in the doctor's mind it appeared to reflect on the Hintons rather than on George.

"Your father's a clever fellow, Jim," he said, "and there's no denying it; but, for all that, he isn't the sort of man I should take for a model."

"I love his books, grandpapa."

"I daresay. You may. I've not read them. But I know him as a man by the things that he's done, not by what he writes; and that's quite enough for me. However, we'll say no more of it. This question of Oxford is another matter. I shall have to ask your grandmother. And I'll speak to Malthus as well. Sound fellow, Malthus!"

Through the rest of their drive he returned, rather wistfully, Jim thought, to the subject of his own possessions, a reflection of the moment in which he had referred to Jim's future inheritance. "That farm over there, Little Stygate," he said, "was bought in the year when your mother was born. It'll some day be yours; and there's not six inches of wire in a hundred acres. Yes, and you'll have Great Stygate and Essendine Fold, and the houses in Essendine village, including the bakehouse. Brocker, the farm next to Little Stygate'll be Lucy's; it was meant for her mother. It's queer to think of it. When I came here, forty years back, I hadn't a square yard of land to my name. Not so bad for a country doctor, eh? Well, I owe all that to your grandmother. It's a rare thing, I tell you, to find a woman who understands money. Without her, I doubt if I'd ever have saved a penny. That sort of thing's not in my nature. Well, I doubt if it matters much."

He laughed; but the words that he spoke of himself were true. In after years Jim often remembered that moment: the great billow of arid pasture scorched pale by the July sun, but bloomed with an amethystine mist of scabious; the buff glare of that strip of earthen road running straight as a sword-cut, through field after field and gate after gate, to the blue woods of Rossington, heavy with leaf, that swam like a desert mirage on the far horizon; and beside him, or smiling down from the high box-seat, that boyish, open-hearted old man with his fierce white beard, his gay eyes, and his trim, erect little cavalryman's figure.

There was nothing largely heroic about John Weston; no kindling ambition, no iron will, no stern, sacrificial devotion beyond that which he gave to the trust of his calling and never betrayed. A small man, in most things, Jim thought; yet always a good one, with something of the paladin in his kindly, generous spirit, so gallantly childlike, and something pathetic—and childlike too—in the naïveté with which he regarded his own achievements, his innocent love for so many conditions of men, and the tenderness he lavished, with such admiring humility, on that stony, inflexible little woman whom chance, or the inscrutable attraction of opposites, had made his wife. So frank, so simple, so innocent did he seem that day, that Jim, beside him, felt like a tired Titan with the weight of a dark and sorrowful world burdening his shoulders. The knowledge that he had ruthlessly dashed such tender hopes to the ground overwhelmed him with a wave—not so much of love as of sentiment. At that moment he would willingly have recanted, have ceded himself and his future to his grandfather's will; with another word of regret or persuasion he would have thrown in his hand and confessed himself ready to become a doctor, or anything else in the world that the old man wished. But no further word came.

Doctor Weston was kind enough to leave it at that. After supper that evening, in the presence of Aunt Margaret, Lucy, the shrouded canaries and Jim himself, he informed Mrs. Weston of her grandson's decision. The old lady was far too tired by wrestling with

Margaret's trousseau to have any reserves of patience; but fatigue, far from rendering her soft or complaisant, had the opposite effect of stiffening her mood and endowing her with a tense, an almost pathological energy. She sat at the head of the table on the edge of her chair, her rigid spine parallel with the back of it whose support she disdained, her pallid hands regally folded, her face like a mask of alabaster, smooth as a child's, out of which her black eyes, in their cold, bird-like brightness, recalled the reptilian origins of the feathered species.

"I've been talking to Jim," the doctor began, "about his future." And immediately the atmosphere of the room became strained and expectant. Aunt Margaret folded her needlework on the table and honoured Jim with an ingratiating smile; Lucy glanced at him shyly, sideways, prepared for the worst; a ripple ran upwards, almost imperceptibly, beneath the snaky skin of Mrs. Weston's figure to her head, which swayed slightly backwards, like the head of a cobra on guard and prepared to strike.

"Well . . .?" she asked; and it seemed to Jim that her toneless voice had a sibilant, serpentine quality.

"He says that the idea of taking up medicine doesn't attract him."

Mrs. Weston's eyes blinked. "Indeed? Then what *does* attract him? Crossing-sweeping?"

Aunt Margaret's smiling face fell to a look of appropriate horror; Lucy, a faint, irritating smile on her lips, continued to glance sideways at Jim.

"He says that he wants to write," said the doctor, quietly.

"Well, that comes to the same thing, doesn't it?" Mrs. Weston enquired; and Aunt Margaret, seeing the joke just a little later than everyone else, laughed out loud, then smothered her laugh as she caught her mother's eyes.

The doctor laughed too, but uneasily. "Well, not always," he said. "But the point that arises is this: his mind's set on going to Oxford with Julian Hinton."

"To Oxford?" Mrs. Weston echoed coldly. "I don't see the necessity. If the boy's made the best of his advantages at Winchester, he'll have made plenty of friends that are likely to be useful to him socially. The expense of his schooling has cost us enough already. Am I right in supposing that he expects us to go on financing him?"

"I might pull off a scholarship, Gran," Jim said. "I'd work like a nigger."

"I was speaking to your grandfather, Jim," Mrs. Weston reproved him.

"But you were talking about me, Gran," Jim answered incautiously. "You see it's like this. My father was at Balliol . . ."

"Your father!" No wonder she was shocked. It was the first time in his life he had ever alluded to George Redlake. Aunt Margaret turned up her big eyes in horrified surprise; and Lucy, giving up the ghost, closed hers, as though she were saying: "Now you've done it!" Mrs. Weston, on the other hand, appeared to be affronted beyond the limit of appropriate gesture. A slow swaying backward and forward of her satiny trunk was her only sign of emotion. Then, with head thrown back, she struck.

"As if it were not enough for us to have one writer, one wastrel in the family! Has your grandfather worked up this practice, this wonderful position for nothing? Has he taken you out of the gutter"—the word nearly strangled her—"to have all his wonderful kindness thrown back in his face? A writer, indeed! Have you taken leave of your senses? Do you expect to live on your grandfather for the rest of your life? If you do, I can only tell you that you're gravely mistaken. Let me hear no more of this, please!"

She blinked, and her eyes, which had been piercing as diamond drills, were veiled momently, as those of a bird of prey are veiled by its nictitating membrane. When she opened them again they were coldly watchful as usual. In a voice from which every tremor of passion had faded, she admonished Aunt Margaret, whom the tornado had left aghast, to hurry on with her sewing. "You really must finish that chemise to-night, darling," she said, dismissing the contentious subject as though it had never arisen. The doctor yawned loudly, and took refuge in a local newspaper; Jim, still burning to answer, buried himself in his book; Mrs. Weston, the tempest passed, sat on in pale triumph, as motionless and calm as one of those tutelary images whose blank eyes stare into the darkness of Theban tombs. They sat there, all four, in silence, until, through the drawing-room wall, the frivolous ormolu clock tinkled ten, like a giggling shepherdess unable any longer to suppress her amusement at all this solemnity.

This sound, which signified bedtime, was a signal of release. Aunt Margaret folded her work and the doctor his spectacles. Lucy kissed her grandmother good-night and stole away quietly. When Jim, following her example, touched that smooth cold cheek, its very texture betrayed Mrs. Weston's antagonism. A shiver, so fine as to be almost imperceptible, warned him that his monstrous behaviour had not been forgiven—quite needlessly, perhaps, for Mrs. Weston never forgave. Even the surreptitious pat that his grandfather gave him and his cheery "Going to roost, Jim? Sleep well!" could not mitigate the chill of that communicable displeasure, nor convince him that his much discussed future was not as empty and dark as the needlework heart of Africa, at which, in the candlelight, he found himself blankly staring.

Yet, for all the icy Niagara that had overwhelmed and frozen Jim's tender aspiration, he was not, it soon appeared, completely abandoned, as he learned when, a few days later at Cold Orton, Mr. Malthus solemnly escorted him into the refrigerated study in which, miraculously, the ideas of his sermons germinated, and reopened the subject which the doctor had evidently discussed with him.

"We had all taken it for granted," he said, "that you would become a doctor and follow your grandfather. I am afraid that he's disappointed."

"I know. That's the worst of it," Jim confessed. "He's the only one I care about. But I can't do it honestly, Mr. Malthus. I've no vocation. A fellow who takes up medicine should do it as seriously as one who goes into the church."

Mr. Malthus nodded gravely. "I'm glad you feel like that, Jim; but the cases aren't really parallel. You want to write?"

"I believe that I could."

"Yes, hundreds of people do that. A vocation?" He smiled. "Alas, many are called, but few, very few, are chosen. You've been writing at Winchester. Poetry, I suppose?" Jim nodded. "I thought so," he went on, "it's as hard to escape as measles. You wouldn't imagine it, Jim, but I, too . . ." He sighed softly. "Would you like me to look at your verses!?"

No . . . indeed no! The influences of the "fleshly school" were far too apparent in them for those blameless eyes!

"But you *see*," Mr. Malthus went on almost excitedly, his mild eyes beaming behind their concave lenses as he hopped about that cold cage like a dishevelled raven, pouncing on his points, one by one, with a flapping, ungainly delight, "but you see there's no genuine conflict between what your grandfather wants you to do and what you want. You want Oxford? Ah, yes, I know; and, what's more, I can guess exactly why you want to go there—because your friend Julian Hinton's going up next term. Isn't that so? Well, well, life's quite long enough for you to miss four years of being together. His father's a millionaire, I gather. Your grandfather isn't. Your friend may be intended for some profession in which a degree's an advantage. That's why we've just managed to send Paul to Keble."

"Won't it help my writing?" Jim asked.

"Just think. What modern poets do you admire? Shelley? Yes, he was at Oxford, but they soon got rid of him. Keats? Certainly not: Keats walked the hospitals. Browning? He's still in the fashion? No. Rossetti? No. Swinburne?"

"Yes, Swinburne!" Jim protested eagerly.

"Well, you're welcome to him," Mr. Malthus said, with unusual scornful bitterness. "I can give you Tennyson too; he happened to be a member of my own college. Indeed, if it comes to poets, we can give points to Oxford. But let's keep to our argument: the use of the older universities in letters. Take your novelists. Scott, Fielding, Dickens, and all the great ladies were never near one. If you want to be modern, take Meredith, Hardy, Kipling, Wells . . ."

"There's my father," said Jim.

"Your father's name," Mr. Malthus replied with a wry gleam of humour, "isn't precisely one I should use in arguing this point with your grandmother. But all these great writers I've mentioned, and many others, had experience of life before they began to write books. In the middle ages, of course, a writer was nearly always a parson. To-day, alas, imagination and learning are not outstanding attributes of my calling. But, if you want a rich knowledge of humanity—and great books are born from the courage of life in triumph or defeat—you can't possibly find it better than by becoming a doctor."

Was it knowledge of life that Jim wanted? The desires of his heart, as he knew, were on a less noble plane. Mr. Malthus rated him too highly. The objects of his longing had no validity in that austere mind. And yet he sought these ignoble things—wealth, elegance, fame—not for their material value, but only because they might bring him nearer to Cynthia.

"After all," Mr. Malthus said, as he finally alighted at Jim's side, "there is no great hurry. Between now and the beginning of next term you'll have time to think everything over. And if I can help you . . . Well, you know that we're all very fond of you. Come and talk it over with me whenever you feel inclined."

VII. *The Essendines*

AND what, for the moment, did it matter? Already signs of the Essendines' nearing arrival multiplied before his eyes: in a conspicuous increase in the stature of Mrs. Jewell who, fully two inches taller than before, paraded the village street with a letter in her hands on which she had taken small pains to conceal the familiar coronet with its pearl-tipped rays; in a sort of sluggish activity on the part of her husband, watching the sexton bent double with his shears among the rank grass that fringed the churchyard path; in a coming and going of decorators who carried ladders and scaffolding, planks and pots of paint and buckets of whitewash, or of leisurely builders from Leicester, who spent their mornings whistling over the carcase of one stable wing, which was being converted at last into a garage, and the evenings whistling after Miss Minnet's pretty housemaid; in a systematic unwinding of mummified furniture; in a sweeping away of cobwebs from the eyes of unblinking dead Folvilles; in a counting of sheets and blankets and table-linen that drove Mrs. Hadley, the housekeeper, unnerved by four years of lethargy, nearly mad; in a hysterical shrieking of live peacocks whose terraces had been invaded by so many strangers, and a smartening of peacocks in topiary, whose ragged tails the head-gardener shaped and trimmed in the likeness of no living bird's; in a day-long corncrake clatter of horse-drawn mowing-machines that shaved and re-shaved the lawns to the skirts of the crusaders' cedars; in a clatter of excited tongues which echoed as ceaselessly among the bric-a-brac of every genteel drawing-room within ten miles of Thorpe Folville.

As to the exact date of their arrival, Mrs. Jewell, who knew as little of it as everyone else, was, naturally, mysterious, though the coronetted letter which she continued to carry like a rod of office or a Royal Enclosure badge implied that she was in constant touch with Grosvenor Square. The best informed person in Thorpe—Mrs. Jewell of course excepted—was Miss Minnet's pretty housemaid, to whom the young builders communicated (amongst other things) the latest and least reliable news; but her place was soon usurped by the chauffeur, who arrived with the new Panhard cars. He was French; his name M. Dupont—the pronunciation of which was immediately anglicized by the village in the form of Mr. Dewpoint.

According to this foreign dignitary, who knew nothing whatever about it, the family might be expected within a week, accompanied by a house-party of anything from ten to thirty visitors, including royalty. Mrs. Jewell, on hearing this news, shook her head. Her lips, she implied, were sealed—though why the date of anyone's arrival should be wrapped in so profound a secrecy, Jim couldn't imagine. Then, like a flight of white doves released, the invitations for the garden-party fluttered out, and Jim knew, at last, the limit set to his waiting.

It was only on the very eve of this party—the seventh of August—that Cynthia and her mother hurried down to Thorpe. Lord Essendine, who never travelled with his wife if he could help it, had been there for nearly a week before them—had been very much there, as the harassed face of Mr. Black, the agent, proclaimed. During Lord Essendine's absence abroad on his country's business, the spirit of that country had changed. In the last year of his vice-regency the Lords had thrown out Lloyd George's "People's Budget." At the January elections the Liberals had been returned with a clear mandate to make that "piece of highway robbery" law; so that poor Mr. Black, prepared with all sorts of elaborate and ingenious proposals for estate expenditure, found himself faced with a master quite different from the one he had known. Lord Essendine wouldn't even look at them. To judge from his behaviour one would have thought him on the verge of bankruptcy, which, of course, he wasn't. He was frightened, however, and, even more than frightened, offended by the scandalous ingratitude which the electorate had shown toward himself as a model landlord, and convinced that it couldn't have happened if he had been on the spot. Worse things were to come. The near future was black already with the shadow of the Parliament Act, which threatened not only the powers and dignities but the very existence of his caste. He would be expected to take a part worthy of his name and reputation in this fight for life which he knew to be lost before ever it was joined. In the meantime he decided to put his house in order. Far from exfoliating into new grandeurs, as everyone had expected, the Castle establishment was to be ruthlessly pruned. In large things, particularly those which concerned his personal dignity, he had always been prepared to spend lavishly and give generously. In trifles, on the other hand, he was habitually careful to the degree of meanness. After winning or losing heavily at bridge—a game in which generally inferior minds seem occasionally capable of developing a superior faculty—he would stand waiting five minutes for a halfpenny change on a box of matches. At Thorpe Castle, where hundreds of pounds were squandered each year on kennels and stables, he grudged every shilling that was spent on the comfort or modernization of the house itself, which remained, in the twentieth century, lighted by oil lamps and equipped with two obsolete bathrooms. And whereas, at the great political "at homes" which he gave in support of the party, the splendours of Essendine House would be enhanced by the most sumptuous decorations of flowers and the most costly music, the addition of a single scullery maid to the kitchen staff would cause him as much anxiety as that of a penny to the income-tax. The immediate result of the sense of political uncertainty in which he now found himself was a campaign of petty, panic-stricken economies that drove poor Mr. Black to the brink of resigning his post within a week.

George Essendine, as he was known to his friends, was not an imaginative man. From those ancestors whose political finesse had established the family's preponderance amid the corruptions of the eighteenth century, he had inherited nothing but great wealth and a tradition of good manners. Not even their good looks, for, as Jim had already noticed, his long face, which appeared to have been not only shaved but scrubbed, resembled that of Ernest, Dr. Weston's stableman. His tastes were as simple and, radically, as gross as those of any average country gentleman; and though he knew all the family's artistic treasures by heart and could show them to guests very nearly as well as the housekeeper, his mind was entirely devoid of æsthetic perceptions, their place being taken by a military sense of symmetrical order which he had learned in the Guards, and which made him prefer a bad picture hung straight to a masterpiece hung ever so slightly askew. This naïve rigidity of outlook extended itself to the ordering of his life, in which attitudes and opinions were disposed with the regularity of a guardsman's belongings at a kit inspection, being divided, for purposes of convenience, into two equal and watertight compartments, public and private.

In the first, and by reason of his habit of discipline, the more important, he had acquired a complete wardrobe of attitudes which he put on like uniforms to suit individual occasions; a court-dress, for instance, in which he had perfected the ticklish technique of managing royalty and seeing that they made no mistakes that were not calculated; the unofficial garb of a private personage, in which he wrote letters to *The Times* that were models of disinterested dignity; an official robe, adaptable to the House of Lords or provincial political platforms, in which his speeches—or rather his speech, for, though varied in application their content was invariably the same—were constantly used as pegs for journalists' leaders. "As Lord Essendine has wisely remarked," the *Morning Post* would declare. "With all due respect to Lord Essendine," the *Daily News* protested—though Lord Essendine had probably said nothing that wasn't a platitude. This dignified nullity served his purpose as chairman at innumerable committees and conferences and public dinners, to say nothing of exhibitions, bazaars and layings of foundation-stones, occasions on which he could be trusted never to say anything of any importance and to say it with brevity.

For this reason the British Public, which shuns originality and distrusts all cleverness, had taken him to its heart. He was, as, by inference, he never failed to insist, though it seemed hardly necessary, a plain man; and since, in the struggle for public esteem, a reputation for honest stupidity is half the battle, George Essendine, who was neither so honest nor so stupid as people supposed, had copyrighted this pose not only in English but in all European languages, and the fact of his inherited wealth enhanced it with the added distinction of his having entered public life, like the typical Englishman that he was, with no axe to grind.

In this judgment, as so often happens, the public were mistaken; for though it was his wealth, his personal popularity, and the assurance that he was far too well bred to turn awkward, that had procured him his vice-regency, George Essendine had accepted that honour, to put it quite bluntly, because he wanted a Garter. No other reason—not even his sense of duty—could have compelled him to exchange his comfortable English life for the forms and pomps of a Vice-regal lodge; his soul lusted for that band of blue ribbon like a village girl's; and, as luck would have it, no sooner had he left the country than the Liberals came in—with the result that he returned to England still ungartered, with a sense of four wasted years, a suspicion of liver which made his temper, according to Mr. Black, abominable, and a determination to consolidate his position in preparation for the worst.

No sooner had Lady Essendine arrived with Alec and Cynthia on the eve of the garden-party than she found herself caught unawares in the ground-swell that succeeded the storm which had broken on the head of poor Mr. Black. The striped tenting of the marquees which had risen on the lawns like monstrous mushrooms that morning had excited her husband as a red rag excites a bull. What was the meaning, he asked, after dinner, of those abominable erections?

The question, though threatening, was put in terms of the utmost propriety, rather in the manner with which he might have framed one in the House of Lords. George Essendine, though he had occasionally been unfaithful to his wife, had never been openly rude to her since the day when he first had met her adorned with the ingenuous charms of a debutante in the drawing-room at Balmoral. Their relations, apart from the most intimate, had habitually been conducted with all the decorum of international diplomacy, and with a consciousness of the fact that in humiliating his wife he would be detracting from that personal dignity of which she was a part. And Lady Essendine, with an equal dignity of her own, acquiesced in the same convention. Though she knew that her husband was seething like a volcano, her answer was as serenely untroubled as though he had paid her a compliment.

"Well, you see George, I thought we had better get it over," she said. "I know it's a bore. But after all, we haven't been near the place for four years. It just has to be done."

"I don't see any reason," he protested, "why people shouldn't have come to the house. There's plenty of room to receive them here without making the place like a fair-ground."

"Yes, I know," Lady Essendine answered mildly. "Of course it's ridiculous. But, you see, when you call it a garden-party, that's what they expect. They'll wander about the house anyhow; they're so inquisitive. But what they like best is to walk on the lawns and show off their party frocks, poor darlings. I promise you it shan't happen again, and it'll soon be over," she added, with the smile of a mother conducting her schoolboy son to the dentist's.

"Party frocks!" said Lord Essendine gloomily. "It's certain to rain."

"They won't stay very long in that case. That's one compensation. Those marquees are too frightfully close in wet weather," she said with a satisfied smile.

"Thank heaven *I* shall be out of it anyway," Alec cheerfully remarked. "I must drive in to Melton at four to meet Julian Hinton."

"Oh, Alec . . . you pig!" Cynthia cried. "That isn't fair, mother!"

"What's that?" said Lord Essendine sharply. "What did you say?"

"He's going to back out, father, and leave me all alone with the stuffy old county. It's really too bad of him."

"He's not going to do anything of the sort," Lord Essendine answered firmly. "Dupont will fetch Julian Hinton. You and Alec will stay here with your mother and me and be as polite as you can."

"But they *are* pretty awful, father, as Cynthia says. You must admit it."

"They're the backbone of England, my dear Alec," Lord Essendine answered, forgetting for a moment that his feet were not on a platform. "I hope Mr. Black has looked into the caterer's contracts, Janet," he added, darkly.

"Oh, I'm certain he has, George," Lady Essendine soothingly assured him.

"Well, the glass is going down like anything," said Alec, registering a final protest.

"That means I can't wear my Bangkok picture hat," Cynthia moaned.

"Well, thank heaven for that at least, if it's that ghastly mushroom affair you wore at Eton," Alec answered spitefully.

"That just shows how observant you are. The hat I wore at Eton was lace."

Lady Essendine sighed. "Oh, children, children!" she said. "I do wish you'd stop bickering!" And then, as her husband, from behind the *Morning Post,* grunted approval of her complaint, she tottered out of the room in her tight hobble skirt to talk with the housekeeper and ring up Mr. Black with meticulous questions about the last details of the morrow's arrangements.

It was typical of her husband, but none the less annoying, that he should have poked his nose at the last moment into this business that was so peculiarly her own. As she sat at her lacquer writing table in the room (they still called it a *boudoir*) which she inhabited in the West wing of the Castle, with Mrs. Hadley, the housekeeper, at her elbow scattering "my ladies" like confetti, and, before her, a methodical list of acceptances and refusals, the rose-shaded lamp revealed a face that was still beautiful and quite miraculously young.

At the time when she had married George Essendine in eighteen-ninety, Janet Mortimer had been known as the most brilliantly lovely debutante of a court which was already notable in beauty: a sprightly yet delicate blonde, with that classic perfection of feature which, in a harder and colder medium, she had transmitted to Cynthia. In her birth, her beauty, her tastes—or in the lack of them—she had seemed, and actually was, a perfect physical and mental match for her young husband and, in all externals, an appropriate ornament to his promising career.

In the twenty-odd years that had elapsed since that day of crossed sabres and orange blossom in the Savoy Chapel, Lady Essendine had changed very little in either of these respects. She belonged by a happy chance, to the fortunate first generation that escaped the Victorian decree which made women too old at thirty and discouraged the aid of art in the preservation of beauty. Her features were as perfect as ever they had been; her brow and throat unwrinkled; the skin of her face and neck had been so assiduously lubricated, the underlying muscles so stimulated, as to preserve a smoothness and elasticity that many a middle-class woman of twenty-eight might have envied.

These manipulations had become with her so much a matter of habit as to be now instinctive. Each facial muscle was trained intuitively to maintain its right degree of tension. Even in moments of repose her fine hands would wander thoughtlessly to stroke away non-existent wrinkles from the corners of her blue eyes and smooth upward the skin of her full white throat. So, though it was composed in fact of living tissues, the visible portion of Lady Essendine gave an impression of what, in fact, it was: a lovely mask—not only innocent but incapable of expressing those fluent emotions which make, as they mar, the normal human countenance. She still had her ravishing smile and the trick—if trick it were—of a surprised and surprising azure stare of wide-eyed, disarming candour. In relaxation she showed a sweet, an almost virginal serenity. But, apart from these alternations, which a number of fashionable portrait-painters had standardized in turn, Lady Essendine's face expressed nothing—not because art or habit forbade it to do so, but because, in cold truth, it had nothing else to express.

She was, it appeared, as incapable of intense feeling as of sustained thought. Not that either of these deficiencies—nor even the sketchy education at the hands of a series of penurious, well-born foreign governesses to which the Victorian convention had condemned her—mattered in the least in the station to which it had pleased God to call her as Lord Essendine's wife. They were, on the contrary, positive assets in the conduct of life. A woman of feeling would have suffered in knowing that her husband, whom, curiously enough, she adored, had never loved her; a woman of intellect would have been bored by the trivial interests of the Edwardian court. Lady Essendine neither suffered nor was bored. However far her husband's affection might stray from her, she knew that his sense of his own dignity would compel him to do so discreetly without wounding hers, while the functions of the intellect were quite adequately performed by an inherited social instinct and a remarkable memory for faces, names, and current shibboleths in art and literature, which enabled her to say the right words and avoid the wrong ones in her transitory and superficial relationships with men or women outside her own circle of friends.

In the handling of this limited equipment she showed positive virtuosity, being equally at home with Royalties, for whose idiosyncrasies she had been taught to make allowance; with the County, whose snobbishness, being anything but a snob herself, she humoured and despised; with political parvenus, whose brains or money were essential to her husband's party; with fashionable artists or men of letters, such as George Redlake; with financial magnates, such as Marcus Hinton; with necessary bores, like Mrs. Jewell, or as now, with units in her own domestic machine: Mr. Black at the other end of the telephone or Mrs. Hadley reporting on the arrangements made for visitors' chauffeurs' teas.

She could be charming to all of them; and the secret of her charm lay not in any effort to be charming or desire to please, but in her lack of affectation, her utter unself-consciousness. Her ease and naturalness evoked similar qualities in others. By birth and breeding she was so completely sure of herself that it never occurred to her to ask what people were thinking of her. Their approval or disapproval were matters of indifference to her. And this confidence was justified, for, within the narrow limits of her circumstances, Janet Essendine was a perfectly efficient member of society. Her responsibilities—to her husband, her children, her tenants, her servants, the villagers of Thorpe, the local hospitals, schools, organizations, social, political or charitable—were not only realized but performed with a high sense of conscience and obligation. If she had failed in the least of them she would have felt herself guilty of a betrayal. Her life, as a consequence, was a full one, and, as human lives go, not unhappy.

"I think that is all for to-morrow, Mrs. Hadley," she said, with a smile. "I *do* hope it won't rain."

"I'm afraid that the glass is falling, my lady," Mrs. Hadley murmured doubtfully. She hesitated. "There's just one thing I didn't mention. This chauffeur, Dewpoint, my lady. It's the first time we've had one here. Should he take his meals with the butler and me and Lucile, or go in with the coachman?"

Lady Essendine smiled faintly. What snobs they are! she thought. "Well, I think," she said seriously, "he'd much better eat with you. He speaks English, doesn't he?"

"Well, I suppose you might *call* it English, my lady," said Mrs. Hadley dubiously.

"In that case Lucile will be able to help him, won't she?"

Mrs. Hadley said nothing. She disapproved of all foreigners, particularly the French; she envisaged Dupont and the maid making ribald jokes in a foreign language behind her and the butler's backs. Mr. Dewpoint was already too free in his ways. With a lot of young housemaids she would have preferred him out of the house. However, her mistress had spoken. If anything happened now, it wouldn't be her fault.

"You'll breakfast in your room to-morrow, my lady?" she asked.

"Yes. At eight o'clock, please. I told Lucile. Just tea and toast on a tray. I suppose Dupont has been told to fetch Mr. Hinton? Four-thirty at Melton. He'll sleep in the Chinese room. Yes, yes, I'm quite sure that's all. Tell Lucile that I shall not need her any more this evening. Good-night, Mrs. Hadley."

When the housekeeper had gone Lady Essendine sat on in the rosy lamplight staring at the long list of acceptances that lay on her writing-table. She was not thinking of them nor of the morrow's garden-party. She was thinking—if that were the right word—of the general atmosphere of discomfort, physical and spiritual, that now surrounded her. She had never really liked Thorpe Castle; it was too old and rambling; the dank air of four years of emptiness had penetrated its stones. At this moment she was faced with the unpleasant duty of putting out the lamp. If only she could make George see the absolute necessity of installing electric light! And those dreadful bathrooms, with their ponderous encasings of damp-blurred french-polished mahogany! The rows of brass candlesticks, drawn up like a platoon of guardsmen on the landing tables!

At the moment she didn't dare mention a thing that meant money. George's mind was on wires. These terrible threats of taxation—that Parliament Bill! Why, even four years ago—at the time of his infatuation for that detestably clever girl Juliet Errol, whose husband, thank heaven had taken her off to Madrid—even then he would never have spoken to her (and before the children!) in a manner so undiplomatic as that he had used over those wretched marquees. Times were changing indeed! In this moment of doubt and insecurity it seemed to her as though the whole manner of life to which she had been accustomed was as cumbrous and ill-adapted to meet them as Thorpe itself, with its inhospitable air of cold stone, those awful bathrooms, its oil-lamps and rows of wastefully polished brass candlesticks. Why, even if George had got his Garter it would have made no real difference. Nothing short of catastrophe, a conflagration, could put an end to the house and the state that it symbolized. Yet to-morrow—she *did* so hope it wouldn't rain!—they would have to pretend to all these excellent, boring people whose votes counted so little in these days, that the splendours of Thorpe were as secure as the Bank of England—if, indeed, the Bank were secure with Lloyd George at the Treasury!—and themselves as superior to the march of history as those Folvilles whose empty shells of chased steel suspended in the great hall below had flashed through the lists at the Field of the Cloth of Gold. Well, even if they weren't so secure, even though, perhaps, they were anachronisms, they could only remain what they were and had always been.

But *were* they the same?—and here a new doubt assailed her—wasn't there something a little sinister and significant in the way, that evening, her dear Alec had calmly suggested absenting himself from to-morrow's garden-party? His father, whatever his weaknesses might be, could never have contemplated such a dereliction of duty. That, too, was nothing but a symptom of the disjointed times; a weakening of that sense of responsibility for which and by which they existed. Dear Cynthia, too . . .

Of course it was beneath her dignity to listen to gossip, particularly when it affected her own children; yet, in spite of discouragement, rumours had reached her of conduct on Cynthia's part which, high spirits allowed, was hardly in accordance with the tradition of Victorian rosebuds. According to her informant Cynthia had been seen dancing at one of these night clubs. Naturally she hadn't questioned her about it. If mother and daughter didn't trust each other the whole dignity of their relationship would be shattered. And she *did* trust Cynthia. Any casual observer could see that Cynthia had been cast in the same mould as herself. Yet she, in her first season, had been happily and suitably betrothed, while dear Cynthia, for all her loveliness, wasn't. What was more, no whispers of any serious attachment had reached her ears. With things as they were —the House of Lords threatened and that budget undermining the very foundations of society—it was vitally important that Cynthia should make a good match, and the sooner the better. Dear Alec, of course, could wait; these matters were not so urgent with a boy as with a girl.

She turned down the lamp, blew it out, and lit her candle. At the door of her husband's dressing-room she paused and listened. A subdued noise of stamping and snorting warned her that George Essendine, in a state of nature, was engaged in the series of contortions by which, so successfully, he preserved his soldierly figure. She did not disturb him. As she passed down the corridor on her way to her own virtuous bedroom, holding before her the candle whose light illuminated the scandalous bosoms of a number of Folville ladies who, according to Lely, looked anything but virtuous, a new idea slowly penetrated Lady Essendine's mind.

"Julian Hinton," she thought. "A nice boy, a very nice boy. His father is a charming man, and a millionaire. An only son, too. Now who was his mother, I wonder?" Being less perfectly equipped genealogically than Mrs. Weston, she could not answer that question; but, as she undressed in her solitary bedroom within the fan of heat with which a wood fire vainly tempered its secular coldness, the image of Julian Hinton still kept her company. By present-day standards (poor Queen Alexandra, she thought, so lonely and so deaf!) the match would not be a bad one. And then, as she blew out the candle and laid her head on the cool old linen—for the sake of her neck she always dispensed with a pillow—she thought: "If dear Cynthia were provided for like that, I'm sure that I might persuade George to put in electricity. And just two more bathrooms," she thought. "Baths can't be so fabulously expensive. Dear Cynthia . . . dear Alec . . . poor George . . ."

An excellent wife and mother . . . As she lay there with her hair neatly braided, on the verge of sleep, the flicker of firelight lit, momently, a face that might have well have been that of a girl of sixteen.

But Jim did not sleep. To have slept would have been to abnegate his heart's supreme joy in the consciousness of Cynthia's presence. So near was she, and the August night of so holy a silence, that had he spoken her name aloud as he stood at his window the sound might almost have reached that of her bedroom, in the Castle's west wing, where, tired by the railway journey and irritated by the defection of that devil Lucile whom her mother had sent off duty, she was anxiously watching the roughness with which a strange under-housemaid unpacked and disposed of her clothes.

She lay on the counterpane, her long body stretched out like that of a luxurious cat, superintending the process. She was so tired that she hadn't even the energy to go to bed. This day, to which somewhat vaguely she had looked forward, had petered out in a pitiful anticlimax. It had been silly and childish, after all, to sentimentalize

Thorpe, to invest the idea of it with an artificial, pastoral charm, to think of it as a sort of midland *Petit Trianon*. How false that nostalgia was she had realized at the moment, eight hours before, when the train drew out of St. Pancras carrying her away from the scene of her first season's excitements toward three months of rustic boredom. Her head was still dizzy with triumph, unsteadied by the flatteries of a world that seemed made to pay her obeisance. No wonder that Thorpe had fallen a little flat! Its grand, grim discomforts appalled her. The very silence of the woods and fields that enfolded it—that silence which Jim Redlake filled with his passionate dreams—served only to make her conscious of the nervous exhaustion of which, until now, her keyed-up brain had been unaware.

Now, just as a traveller lately landed feels on dry land the rolling and lift and fall of the full Atlantic, Cynthia's restless mind was possessed by an echo of jigging dance-music and high-pitched voices, a reflex of flickering lights and colours that mocked the enveloping darkness. It got on her nerves; for the first time, perhaps, in her life she felt horribly lonely. All the girls who had shared her hurried and laughing confidences, the boys who had danced or sat out with her night after night, the enchanting company of which, during that London summer, her life had consisted, were now scattered northward in the pepper-pot towers of Scotch castles and shooting-lodges. It was just like her father in his present mood, she thought, to have gone and let Glen Shrieven to those convenient Americans, and dumped his own family at Thorpe, like sheep in a pen. Of course Thorpe was all very well in the hunting season; but hunting—real hunting—wouldn't begin for another two months. In the meantime, what *could* a civilized person do in High Leicestershire? There wasn't a soul of her own kind and age whom she knew within miles. Not one who could speak the same language and knew the same people. The future resolved itself into an endless dreary vista of tennis and garden-parties.

And to-morrow it would begin! Well, that would be one day less. She supposed she must make the best of it. If it didn't rain—though of course it always *did* on occasions of this kind—she would wear the new Bangkok hat which this gawk of an under-housemaid was handling as though she thought it were made of cast-iron.

"Oh, *do* be careful!" she cried.

The girl gaped in astonishment.

"It's rather big, isn't it, my lady?" she said confidentially as she swung the hat by the brim. "I hardly know where to put it."

"Oh, leave it to me. You needn't worry to unpack any more to-night. I'm too tired to think. I don't want to be called in the morning."

"Very good, my lady. Good-night."

Alone in the mocking silence Cynthia undressed—not methodically folding her clothes, as Lady Essendine had done, but throwing them down haphazard. As she lay there, her long legs outstretched, staring up at the ceiling which some imported Italian had embellished two hundred years earlier with a confusion of sumptuous limbs which writhed over it like the coils of a perishing boa-constrictor, the face of this tired child, with its firmly set brows and lovely, sulky mouth, seemed, somehow, far older and less serene than that of her mother whose form it so closely resembled.

She slept; but still Jim did not sleep. Before he left his dark window the night had grown cool in the soundless drift of air that flows from the East before dawn. Already, had he but known it, the tide of summer had turned. Stirred by that silent ebb the spires of foxgloves shed their lower bells, and curled leaves fluttered helplessly downward from the pyramids of the limes. Already, unheard, in the opaque air that hid the stars, the moorland curlews flew southward to their sandflats and saltings. But Jim Redlake knew none of these things. For him the autumnal air was sweet with faint perfumes of Spring. As he turned from the window to his bed he took a pencil and wrote:

You came . . . and lo, my heart was a wild cherry
That in lonely woodlands frees its innocent bloom
Starring their wintry darkness with a white rapture . . .

He paused. Though the poem was unfinished, there was no more to say. Two words were enough to express all his heart's wild content. To-morrow, he thought, to-morrow . . .

VIII. *Carnival*

DAWN broke on a discouraging drizzle which thinned, as the light increased, to a white mist so dense that for all Jim could see from his bedroom window he might have been up in a lighthouse perched on a cliff. The mist lay in a milky coverlet over all the world. It muffled the familiar morning sounds of Thorpe Folville: the clatter of stable-buckets, the tinkle of Atkins's anvil, the shuffling hoofs of horses at exercise down the village street.

"Good weather for mushrooms, Mr. Jim!" Ernest told him cheerfully.

"At any rate," Mrs. Weston declared at breakfast, "it will lay the dust."

In a hundred other houses that morning the promise of the day was watched with equal anxiety: for the only place in which the Castle garden-party was not regarded as a social occasion of the first importance was the Castle itself. At the doctor's surgery, indeed, the morning routine maintained its normal rhythm. Rheumatic farm-labourers straightened their creaking joints and tottered in to enlarge on their poor old symptoms; plump farmers' wives, with red cheeks and burdened baskets, dropped in on their way to market for a bottle of cough mixture; three babies cried as they were vaccinated; two aching teeth were extracted; and at half past ten precisely Lord Essendine's double, Ernest, brought the yellow-wheeled dogcart to the door, and the doctor drove off on his round to Rossington.

But the other inmates of The Grange, Jim included, were quite unaware of these prosaic activities. As soon as Eliza had cleared the breakfast-table the dining-room assumed the appearance of a dressmaker's workshop, snowed under with the various confections which Aunt Margaret and Lucy, according to the weather, would wear or not wear. Amid this confusion, over which Mrs. Weston presided with unruffled dignity, the harassed Eliza darted in and out like a terrified ant, fetching safety-pins, fragments of lace, and needles and cotton: for though Lucy's new frock was ready, Aunt Margaret's, as usual, was subject, at the last moment, to florid improvisations.

Although he was as restless as any of them, The Grange that morning was no place for Jim. As Aunt Margaret made no bones about telling him, he was in the way; so, leaving them all in the state to which, it appeared, the mere sight of chiffon and artificial flowers could reduce the entire sex, he went wandering disconsolately through damp grass to that high corner of the paddock from which, like gaunt cliffs looming through sea-fog, the Castle towers might be seen. In this solitude he tried to finish the poem which he had begun in the small hours. Quite vainly. The words wouldn't come. It seemed, indeed, as if the images that flowered so luxuriantly in Cynthia's absence must shrivel to nothing in the dazzling light of her actual presence. That splendour possessed his brain with its fierce effulgence. He could neither think nor see; he could only feel; and feeling itself was only an exquisite pain: a numb hunger of the spirit that nothing could satisfy but the sight of her eyes, her lips, the sound of her voice. Would these things satisfy that hunger? He could not tell. He could do nothing but possess his empty aching heart in patience until that moment of dread and of desire should decide its fate.

By midday the mist had thinned to a blue haze through which the gold flag on the Castle keep drooped languidly. By lunch-time, when Dr. Weston returned from his round, the sun had burst out triumphantly, and a light breeze had arisen. By three, when the house still echoed with Aunt Margaret's cries for help, and Jim himself had tied and untied his necktie for the fifth time, the length of the village street lay empty in blazing sunlight, like a triumphal alley, clean swept for the procession of equipages in which the guests would approach the Castle gate-house. At the cross-roads the uniform of the village policeman, standing erect, gave the occasion official sanction. The tradesmen stood in their shop-doors; above them, in bedrooms, their wives and daughters waited without concealment. At the end of the street, where the walls of Rose Cottage retired four feet from the pavement, Miss Minnet, screened by the lace curtains and trailing briers of her mullioned drawing-room windows, sat discreetly expectant, like a modest lady in a stage-box.

Miss Minnet had not been invited to the garden-party. Her past was against her. Not, indeed, that she had ever been guilty of moral delinquency. On the contrary, her blameless earlier life had been spent as a mistress in one of the Leicester secondary schools, from which a small legacy had enabled her to retreat to this modest retirement. The fact that she was a devout churchwoman had revealed to Mrs. Jewell these shady antecedents and thereby established her social category. For though Miss Minnet's usefulness in the parish, in humble capacities, might entitle her to appear with propriety at such informal functions as Mrs. Weston's tea-party, one must, in the interests of society, draw the line somewhere. Mrs. Jewell, as final arbiter, had drawn it, decidedly, at Miss Minnet: and Miss Minnet, good churchwoman that she was, had accepted the hierarchical decision of the Vicar's wife, of whom she was terrified, as unquestioningly as though it had proceeded, through proper channels, from the Archbishop of Canterbury. Indeed, she was looking forward, without any wistfulness, to an afternoon of rich entertainment. No carriage would enter the Castle gates that day without her seeing its occupants, with all of whom she would be familiar, at least by sight. She would sit at her post in the rocking-chair all afternoon. At four o'clock, her pretty maid, Edith—Mr. Dewpoint's fancy—would bring her in a nice cup of Horniman's tea, not too strong, and a buttered bun. She could have all the fun of the function without any of its terrors, seeing all that she wanted to see of the local celebrities without being seen herself; whereas, if she had been invited to the party, she would certainly have been forced to spend money on a new costume, that she couldn't afford, and which nobody would have noticed anyway, and have wandered about the grounds, half dead with shyness, wondering if she dared bow to people she'd met once at a tea-party and terrified of not being recognized by them if she did. So, just out of the sun, Miss Minnet sat, gently rocking herself, determined not to miss one moment of the pageant provided for her.

By a quarter to four the procession had already begun. It was headed, quite rightly, by Mr. and Mrs. Jewell: Mrs. Jewell in "good black" (as the local paper reported a week later) her husband prepared not for tennis, apparently, but for archery, and wearing a badge of the Royal Toxophilite Society. At their heels, and, indeed, very nearly over them, the Cowens' red Daimler appeared, Lady

Juliet bouncing up and down, for the road was uneven, in the high *tonneau* to which motorists of those days were condemned, and an odd yard of motor-veil flying out behind like a newly-commissioned captain's pennant.

Through the clouds of dust that arose from this monster's passage there emerged, as from the mists of time, an enormous drag of the type which, in bygone days, transported those reactionary families who scorned the stage-coach to their quarters in town. The horses that drew this amazing vehicle, the coachman who drove them, the odd man, masquerading as footman, who sat at his side, and the two old ladies, in jet-spangled mantles, whose figures surmounted it, might well have been drawn from the same dusty depository as the drag itself. They were the two exclusive Miss Swynnertons of Endercote Hall. Joint heiresses of a houseful of Tudor ghosts and furniture, in which they occupied different wings, neither of the Miss Swynnertons had spoken to the other since the end of an unfortunate love-affair, forty years since, in which both were involved. No less an occasion than the Essendines' party, combined with the exigencies of transport, could have dragged them out in each other's company. Miss Minnet, though of course she knew all about them, had never before set eyes on them in the flesh—if indeed their conveyance and themselves were not rather ghosts, obeying the summons of an ancient allegiance. This vision, of itself, made her afternoon a success.

At any rate there was nothing at all ghostly about Mr. Holly, whose pony, as plump and white as himself, came jogging along in the little governess-cart in the Swynnertons' wake. The sight of his satisfied smile, the gay flower in his button-hole, gave Miss Minnet a delicious thrill. She admired Mr. Holly, not only for his love of culture which she, in her small way, shared and emulated, but because—though she didn't dare breathe this to Mrs. Jewell—she was really an Anglican, and never felt quite at home in an evangelical church. Mr. Jewell was far too indolent to rejoice in ritual; he would have been shocked if she had asked him to hear the confessions which, week after week, her conscience adjured her to make. Mr. Holly was so smooth, so silky, so beautifully celibate. As the governess-cart passed her window, Miss Minnet shook her head slowly and smiled.

How different, she thought, from the pallid, austere Mr. Malthus! And yet, as she saw his angular, crowlike figure approaching with long hungry strides, so fast that poor Mrs. Malthus and the girls could scarcely keep up with him, it *did* seem a shame that somebody from Cold Orton hadn't given him a lift. It was a pity that a really good man like Mr. Malthus should have so little charm. Already the bottoms of his black trousers were whitened with dust, while those poor girls' faces would look like peonies by the time they reached the Castle—which was really a shame, for Catherine had improved enormously, and had in her the makings of a most attractive young woman.

"Why, good gracious, Edith!" she said. "Is it four o'clock already? How time flies! You've just made it? Two teaspoonfuls? Yes. That's quite right. It's a beautiful day for the party, isn't it?"

How those motor-cars multiply in these days! she thought, as, with one eye on the road, she watched her tea brewing. Nasty, dusty things! They went by so quickly that occasionally it was quite impossible to see the people inside them. That yellow one, of course, came from Barleythorpe, though she couldn't imagine that his lordship was "in residence" at this time of year. What a pest the cyclists must find them—this poor lady, for instance, who came pedalling her way so grimly down the dusty street! As the approaching figure defined itself, Miss Minnet gasped to realize that the cyclist was none other than Lady Ernestine. She was wearing her usual tailor-made suit, dog-skin gloves, a white silk shirt with a high linen collar, and a stiff sailor hat. What courage, Miss Minnet thought, what true aristocracy! And even as she glowed with vicarious pride to think that the world in which she lived could still boast such old-fashioned virtues, the cup of her joy overflowed. Lady Ernestine, who had dismounted at a run, just abreast of her window, became suddenly aware of Miss Minnet's excited interest. As she peered through the curtains her homely face expanded in a wide smile, and she waved a dog-skin glove in the direction of Miss Minnet, who bowed so violently that she nearly upset her tea.

This generous tribute from one old maid to another—though, if rumour spoke truly, Lord Essendine's sister had once known a passionate romance—made Miss Minnet's thin cheeks flush with pleasure. She was still in a state of happy confusion when a rumble of wheels announced the approach of the doctor's high, yellow-wheeled dog-cart: on the box Doctor Weston, slimly erect in a frock-coat and a top-hat, from which the deep band of crape which he wore at his patients' funerals had been unstitched that morning; by his side, very handsome and regal in a miniature way, Mrs. Weston; and behind, incommoded by the spreading hips of Aunt Margaret, Jim and Lucy. Miss Minnet admired the doctor, she respected Mrs. Weston—even the old lady's admitted snobbishness didn't offend her, because, on a humbler plane, she happened to share it—and while she had been hurt by Margaret's undisguised contempt, she adored her pupil, Lucy, as a reincarnation of her own lost youth, and Jim as the son of his mother, who had been her friend. In spite of all this she couldn't help feeling a little chilled by the fact that the Weston dog-cart rolled past her window without showing any sign of recognizing her existence, such as Lady Ernestine had given. It marked, she reflected, the difference in manners that separated the real aristocracy from the upper levels of the class to which she almost belonged.

"But I do hope Lucy and Jim will enjoy themselves," she thought, as the dog-cart slowed down and disappeared beneath the arch of the Castle gate-house. "How nice for them both to have an opportunity of this kind!"

At the moment poor Jim was not certain that it was as nice as all that. His seat, at the back of the dog-cart, was extremely precarious; he was haunted by a feeling that, even after the fifth attempt, his tie was not straight; the new clothes that Aunt Margaret and Lucy were wearing had made them both so irritable and important that they appeared to regard his company as a positive incubus.

It was exciting none the less to penetrate for the first time the grounds of Thorpe Castle. Issuing from the constriction of the gate-house he found himself in a new, wide world, a green parkland scattered with magnificent oaks and beeches beneath whose shade small groups of delicate dappled deer were feeding, unconscious, apparently, of the party's monstrous invasion. Instead of leading directly to the main entrance, the drive made a series of ceremonious detours which suggested that so stately a presence might not be approached without formal delays. Indeed, they must have covered at least four unnecessary furlongs before, of a sudden, the bulk of the castle appeared.

It was an edifice of some magnificence. In the centre, surmounted by a flagstaff from which the Folville blazon now fluttered in the breeze, the massive Norman keep rose like a sandstone cliff, prolonged Eastward, at a lower level, by a mass of mediæval building, of the same material and character. The Western wing, which the family inhabited, was less discouraging if unsymmetrical, consisting of a series of additions which had been made in Tudor times and reconstructed by Vanbrugh after the Restoration to repair the damages of the Roundhead bombardment in sixteen-forty-seven. Its Palladian facade, whose Corinthian motifs reflected those of the same architect's masterpiece, Castle Howard, commanded the terraced gardens laid out by André Le Nôtre, and the sweep of smooth lawns, scattered with cedars, on which poor Lord Essendine's red-striped marquees and a bandstand had been erected.

"A window for every day in the year!"

Mrs. Weston turned round and confided the fact to Margaret with acute satisfaction. "Lady Essendine's boudoir is over there on the right," she said. But which window among so many, Jim wondered, was Cynthia's? He had not even time to embark on this futile, romantic speculation, before Doctor Weston swerved to the left, in the direction of the stables, and the West wing was lost to view.

It was humiliating to Mrs. Weston that this course should have been necessary. If only their party had been smaller, or the dog-cart a brougham, they might have been driven up to the front door by Ernest in proper style. This divergence, however, proved fortunate; for Aunt Margaret's devotion to the extremes of fashion had so hobbled her ankles as to make it impossible for her to descend from her seat unless she were lifted down like a sack of flour, a proceeding at which a number of the visitors' chauffeurs had the bad taste to smile. Aunt Margaret, though flustered by this operation, soon recovered from it, and set off immediately, as fast as her short steps would allow her.

"Gently, gently, Margaret dear," Mrs. Weston protested. "There's no need to hurry. It's much better form to be a little late than too early on an occasion like this."

Doctor Weston strolled on with a remote and faintly cynical air.

Although he acquiesced, for the women's sake, in functions of this kind, he had no illusions about them. Though Lord Essendine was his opposite in politics he respected the man. They were good enough friends of twenty years standing in the hunting-field; but that didn't mean, as his poor wife vainly imagined, that by setting foot in Thorpe Castle they entered the Essendine world or even drew nearer to it. The very politeness with which they were certain to be received would be evidence, if that were needed, of their social difference. Glancing up at the looming bulk of the Norman keep, from whose summit the golden flag now flew with so false a gaiety, and remembering at the same moment George Essendine's none too intelligent face, he was consumed by an emotion of pity rather than of the awe which his wife and daughter felt at that moment. "Poor devil," he thought, "with this ghastly great place to keep up! The House of Lords helpless, and a new Lloyd George budget next April! Poor devil, indeed!" He put the thought away from him, becoming aware, at the same moment, of Jim's flushed face beside him.

"Well, Jim, old man," he said, "what are you thinking about?"

Jim was thinking: "In two minutes . . . one . . . in thirty seconds I am going to see her."

They entered the great stone doorway. Inside, the light was dim, the dense atmosphere permeated by Thorpe Castle's characteristic odour—of aged stone, of pot-pourri, of aromatic old woods and furniture cream. Their footsteps echoed on the flagged floor, and the echoes rose upward into an air that two lancets of ancient glass illuminated with a mellow, dusty radiance, where four figures in armour, lance upright, bore patient witness to what the descendant of their owners, however unworthily, stood for. A footman bent over Mrs. Weston, who whispered to him.

"Dr. Weston, Mrs. Weston, Miss Weston, Miss Fenton, Mr. James Redlake!" the man bawled.

Ten yards in front of them, on a step that gave the raised effect of a dais, two small human figures, the man in an informal grey flannel lounge suit and a pale-striped Old Etonian tie, the woman ensheathed in cream lace from chin to feet, stood waiting to receive them. For an instant Jim's heart stopped beating, then fluttered wildly. It was she! It could not be she! And indeed it was not, as he realized when he heard the voice of Lady Essendine, so like yet unlike her daughter's, welcoming his grandmother with such a charming enthusiasm.

"*So* nice of you to come!" she was saying. "Yes, of *course* I know your daughter, though really young people in these days are changed so quickly. Yes, in Italy, wasn't it? (Mrs. Weston had said it was Italy). Four years! We can hardly believe it. Yet, when we come back here, you know, and see all our old friends about us, we feel as though we'd never been away. Your grandson . . . Jim . . . oh, yes, Jim Redlake. Of course I remember perfectly. How d'you do?" And she took Jim's hand for a moment in her long, lifeless fingers. "And you, doctor? What a comfort for all of us to know that you're still going strong. Yes, real 'Queen's weather' as we used to say in the days that you and I remember. George, here's Mrs. Weston and the doctor. *So* nice of you to come. Yes, of *course* I know your daughter, though really in these days . . ."

It began again, though this time the recipients of these courtesies were Mrs. Malthus and Catherine, whose dusty figures the Weston dog-cart had overtaken on the drive. Jim's ears were divided between them and the words of Lord Essendine, who, more ponderously, but apparently with equal enthusiasm, was greeting his grandfather. Lord Essendine's larynx was already suffering from the strain. He cleared his throat noisily and spoke in a husky voice. "Well doctor, *how* nice of you to come! I know how busy you are. As young as ever, I see. Well, I've not done so badly myself, considering the abominable climate and the heavy responsibility. A little bit shaky here. (He tapped his liver significantly.) We must talk of that some other time. How well you look after him, Mrs. Weston! Your daughter? Of course I remember her. But really young ladies in present day fashions are as like as peas. What, doctor?" As he fervently shook the hand of Jim, which came his way at that moment, Lord Essendine burst out into the loud, manly laugh which had earned him his popularity as a jolly good fellow with no nonsense about him.

Once more they were out in the sun of the drive, which seemed so blinding after the shade within. It was a triumph of the Essendines' carefully perfected technique that nobody left the dim hall that afternoon without being convinced that these perfectly charming people, so happily united, so informal and unassuming in spite of the great office they had held and the dignities of four hundred years, to which, in the groined vault above them, the armoured shells of their ancestors bore witness, were filled with a simple, an almost childlike delight, in returning to the bosom of their neighbours at Thorpe Folville. It would have been not only cruel but fantastic to suggest that either of them was bored. Lord Essendine, in particular, seemed at the top of his form, gaily buttonholing old friends among the men and chatting with the "county" ladies to whom, as a proof of their place in the great world and his trust in their perfect discretion, he let slip, now and then, small items of intimate gossip about things that had happened or been said in the Royal circle. These royalties, he implied, were really rather a nuisance. It was his duty, occasionally, of course, to put on a frock coat or knee breeches; but, to tell the truth, how much happier and more natural he could be among his old friends in Leicestershire. As a gallant *tour-de-force* he took in to tea the elder Miss Swynnerton, and stood, with her arm in his, admiring the gay effect of the red-striped marquees which the green of the lawns set off to such great advantage.

"Yes, they *are* pretty, aren't they?" he said, with a boyish enthusiasm. "Upon my soul I'd like to keep them standing a day or two longer. Of course, Thorpe is a horrible architectural mixture. How often I envy your perfect Tudor at Endercote. Your people were there, you know, long before mine were thought of," he added humbly. "There's Janet. Of course you've seen her?" And he called Lady Essendine, who was passing and came over to join them, scattering a series of brilliant smiles and blue glances as she advanced.

"I haven't seen Alec and Cynthia, Janet," he said cheerfully. "Do you happen to know where they are?"

Lady Essendine didn't. "I've been really too busy to notice, George dear," she answered sweetly.

He turned politely to his companion. "I should like you to have seen Folville and Cynthia, Miss Swynnerton," he said. "Oh yes, you would scarcely recognize them, though Cynthia, they tell me, has her mother's eyes and mouth. And anyway, in the present day fashion," he went on, as though the idea had just struck him, "all young women are like as peas. I'm delighted to see that you haven't adopted this tubular mode. You see Janet's succumbed, more shame to her! Ah, it's only old stagers like you and me who have the strength of our convictions. Backwoodsmen, as they call us now. Well, that's what we are. Sykes!" he called to the butler who was passing—"Have you seen Lord Folville or Lady Cynthia anywhere?"

"No, my lord, I can't rightly say that I have—not lately, that is."

The smile on Lord Essendine's face faded for a moment.

"You might see if you can find them and tell them I'm waiting here for them. I wonder where they've got to."

And so did Jim. This day of days, to which he had looked forward so eagerly for more than three months, was doomed to become a failure. Wherever he went his hopes were cheated, again and again, by the clear and rather loud voice of Lady Essendine which made him think the marvellous moment was near. The doctor, his respects once paid, had discreetly faded away, taking the dog-cart with him and leaving Aunt Margaret to hobble home as best she could. Mrs. Weston was moving about the lawns with a slow, purposive dignity, determined to impress her presence on as many people as possible. At tea-time Lucy had been daringly annexed by that gay dog Mr. Holly, who led her away, in the familiar but strictly non-committal style that he had with young ladies, to tempt the emotional dangers of exploring the maze of clipped yews on the lower terrace. Aunt Margaret, in the absence of her Mohun—knee-deep at that moment, no doubt, in some ottery Northern stream—had firmly attached herself to Mr. Withers, the grey-headed Melton solicitor who handled the legal business of the doctor's estate. Abandoned by his family and always seeking in vain for a glimpse of Cynthia, Jim wandered about self-consciously through that restless medley of colour and sound where the heart-breaking high notes of the Sherwood Foresters' silver cornets supplied a background of false and luscious sentiment against which, like players in a pageant, the guests on the lawn seemed to perform their movements in time.

"I *do* hope you've had some tea!"

Once more the solicitous voice of Lady Essendine startled and deceived him. Jim blushed and thanked her, answering, quite untruly, that he had, then, turning, found himself faced by the smile of Catherine Malthus.

"I've bowed to you three times, Jim," she said, "without your deigning to notice me. Why ever do you look so unhappy? You look as if you'd lost something."

"I'm frightfully sorry; I swear I didn't see you," he told her truthfully. He took shelter, with gratitude, in the Malthus family group. It was curious that these people who were, socially, rather "out of it," put him more at his ease than anyone else he had seen that afternoon. They took him for granted. He didn't have to pretend with them, just because they themselves were so natural, so free from pretensions. Mr. Malthus, it was true, looked about him a little grimly, as though the spectacle of so much lavish, unproductive expenditure on fripperies of food and clothing pricked his social conscience with reminders of his thinly-lined poor-box; Mrs. Malthus, too, wore a look of anxiety, as if she felt that the parish of Cold Orton might be swallowed by an earthquake or the church struck by lightning in her absence. Yet how dignified they both were, compared, for instance, with Mrs. Jewell, who went scouring the lawn for titles like a dog questing truffles, and would set at a pair of gaiters at three hundred yards' range! Even Catherine and Cecil, in their frocks so pathetically dowdy in spite of the care they had spent on them, had a share in this dignity. Their gentle humour, the unaffectedness of the accents they had learnt from their father, the simple candour of their looks and smiles, made them, somehow, more real, more sane than their present surroundings. In their company Jim shed his own distressing self-consciousness. It was as though, for the first time that day, he felt his feet planted on the bed-rock of common humanity.

"How hard Lady Essendine works, Jim," Catherine was saying. "Do you know, I don't think there's a single person here to-day that she hasn't made a point of speaking to! And Lord Essendine's just as busy. It can't be much fun to carry off an affair of this kind, putting hundreds of people at ease who are thinking of nothing but themselves. How well they do it!"

"It's their job, I suppose," Jim said. "They learn it like any other job. If you or I . . ."

He stopped short of a sudden. He knew he was blushing violently. Over there, in the distance, three figures were slowly descending the steps of the topmost terrace. The one in the middle his wild heart recognized instantly. She was wearing the lily-pale dress she had worn at Eton. The others were Alec Folville and, wonder of wonders, Julian!

"Yes . . .?" Catherine inquired, inviting him to finish his sentence. Jim felt that her calm eyes were searching his crimson face.

"I'm sorry." He laughed nervously. "I'm afraid I've forgotten what I was saying. I've just seen someone," he explained: "it's my friend Julian Hinton—you remember, I've often spoken of him. I'd no idea he was coming to-day. If you don't mind, Catherine, will you excuse me a moment?"

He left her precipitately. Don't hurry and make a fool of yourself, his reason warned him. Don't hurry, indeed! If Cynthia had been alone he would never have dared to approach her. Even the company of Alec Folville would have been intimidating. But Julian . . . his own friend! He clutched at the heaven-sent opportunity. Why on earth hadn't Julian let him know he was coming to Thorpe? Too much trouble, no doubt: that was just like his casual ways! In his anxiety to catch up with them before some less worthy person engrossed her, Jim almost collided with the wisp-like form of the younger Miss Swynnerton, who, frail in her flowing skirts as one of the Endercote ghosts, drew back with a gasp, as though fearing that the wind of his passage would blow her away.

"Julian . . . Julian!" he cried. Even now they were quite unaware of him. Julian turned at the sound of his voice; his fine, serious face lit up with a sudden smile.

"Hello, Jim, here you are!" he said. "I thought I should see you."

"But why on earth didn't you write and tell me? You see, if I'd known . . ."

Once more in the middle of a sentence he stopped. She had turned towards him. Ah, why had he ever imagined that her mother was like her? The brim of the big Bangkok hat threw the bloom of a dusky amethyst on her ivory throat. Her eyes, in its shadow, so big, so luminous, looked full into his. With that cold, imperious air of complete security they drank in his worship, not with scorn nor even with patronage, but as though it were due through the divine right of her beauty. She threw up her head in that gesture of challenge that he knew so well, and the lifting shadow of her hat let in the sun to drench with amber the dazzling purity and delicacy of texture in her pale skin, unflawed save by a single grain of brown pigment, at the corner of the lips, which, marked for the first time at that moment, was to haunt and provoke Jim's imagination for months to come. As he gazed, the proud lips parted; the lovely mouth smiled.

"Oh, how do you do?" she said.

He was very well, thank you, Jim said; he could not tell her the truth—that his body and soul were transported by the staggering knowledge that all the imaginings on which they had fed for months were beggared by the rapture of her golden reality; that he, who had thought himself in love, had been treasuring an image which compared with her glowing self was a lifeless shadow. The sound of another voice broke in on his mute confusion. Lord Essendine's. "Oh, *there* you are at last, Alec," he said.

"Yes, father. Here's Julian Hinton. Do you want me?" Alec Folville answered.

Lord Essendine acknowledged the presence of Julian perfunctorily, ignoring Jim. As he swept Alec away Cynthia pursed her lips in a little grimace.

"God! Poor old Alec's in for it now," she said, with a laugh. And, from that moment, the air—not exactly of formality, but of restraint—that had held them vanished completely. While Cynthia, with feigned awe, explained the enormity of Alec's offense in dashing off to Melton with the car in the middle of the party to fetch Julian, they instantly became a jolly group of childish conspirators, half amused and half shocked by the scrape into which a mischievous comrade has landed himself.

"Let's keep out of his way for goodness' sake," she implored them, "or I shall get in for the backwash." And she hurried them, laughing and talking, with her swift, free steps (for the lily-of-the-valley picture-dress did not conform to the mode's restrictions) to the lowermost terrace where Mr. Holly and Lucy were emerging somewhat bashfully from the intricacies of the clipped-yew maze.

"Oh, dear, dear! Whoever would have thought it of Mr. Holly!" Cynthia laughed. "Don't you think it would be more tactful to pretend we haven't seen him?"

But Julian at that moment had recognized Lucy's flushed face. "By Jove, that's your cousin, Jim, isn't it?" he cried. "I should hardly have known her. She's quite changed since I saw her at Eton three months ago."

He raised his hat, and Lucy would have escaped with an awkward bow if Mr. Holly's self-consciousness had not compelled him to make a clean breast of the situation.

"How d'you do, Lady Cynthia?" he panted. "Terrific heat, isn't it? Miss Fenton and I have been engaged in a most perilous adventure. We got hopelessly lost together inside the maze. Indeed, at one time, we both felt we should never get out of it. Most embarrassing, I assure you."

"Never mind, Mr. Holly, you're quite safe now," said Cynthia mischievously. "As a matter of fact it's happened before, you know. Not always by accident, either," she teased him. "Though I think it's the first time I've ever heard of a clergyman . . ."

"My dear Lady Cynthia!" Mr. Holly's voice rose in shocked protest. He shook his head archly and wagged his finger at her. "Ah, I see you're pulling my leg. I call Miss Fenton to witness."

"It really *was* an accident," the blushing Lucy explained. "You see, I dared him . . ."

She looked at that moment, Jim was forced to admit, amazingly pretty, with her violet eyes so serious, her bright cheeks glowing, so tender and brown and soft, with all the delicious mixture of awkwardness and grace of a fluffy kitten that cries to be picked up and fondled. It was just such an emotion that Jim now saw in Julian's eyes, beneath whose devouring interest Lucy's fluttered like nestlings helplessly caught in a powerful hand. He was thankful for this. Ever since the moment when he had seen Cynthia approaching at Julian's side, his heart had been tormented with a vague jealousy—not because he suspected for one moment that Julian was in love with her, but because it seemed to him impossible that anyone should spend a week in her company, as Julian would do now, without a complete surrender. Supposing some whim of boredom or sheer possessiveness impelled her to exercise her charms, no man could resist her; and who was he, to compete with Julian's commanding graces? As he anxiously glanced from one to the other he was enraptured to see that Julian had no eyes for anyone but Lucy, and that Cynthia surveyed them both with a glance of encouraging amusement, a faint smile on her lips.

Mr. Holly, having made his position clear, prepared to escape. "I'm afraid, Lady Cynthia," he said, "I must be getting back to my pastoral labours. My poor pony's legs, like my own, are not what they were. In fact they're not very much fleeter than Shank's mare's."

With a playful laugh and a smile he bowed and left them, abandoning Lucy, thankfully, to Julian's care.

"I dislike that little man dreadfully," said Cynthia emphatically. "Mr. Jewell's an oaf; but there's something *wrong* about him. Don't you think so?" The question, fortunately, was merely rhetorical, a habitual formula with which she ended her sentences without expecting an answer. "I think," she went on without pausing, "we two are *de trop*. Let's go back to the lawn and see how poor Alec's getting on."

Providentially this subject restored the easy atmosphere which the incident of the maze had broken. As they walked together she babbled on freely and naturally, not treating Jim as a stranger but as if he had always been intimate in their family life, taking it for granted that he regarded this function as a terrible bore, and Mrs. Weston's admired "county" as frumpish in the extreme. She supposed they would have to stick on at Thorpe for three months at least. What made everything worse just now was Lord Essendine's liver, which made him see life through yellow spectacles and full of black specks. If Jim only knew how he jibbed at spending a penny and talked about them all being bankrupt within a year! Of course that was all utter rot. If he really were broke he could do what Lord Clun had done, sell some perfectly hideous old master—they really were horrible, weren't they, all fat legs and shadows, didn't he think so?—to someone disgustingly rich like Julian's father.

"It *is* fun having Julian down here, isn't it?" she said. "He's your great friend, isn't he? Of course; I know; he adores you. He's always talking about you—or d'you think it's because of your cousin? He's dreadfully inflammable anyway. You know, down in Dorset, people were frightfully amused about him and father's great friend, Mrs. Errol. Poor Julian!" She laughed. "Do you think he's so very good looking? I don't really. I suppose the fact of the matter is that he isn't my type. I think he's great fun and all that, but I mean I'm quite sure I should never fall in love with him."

Thank heaven for that! Jim thought. Even so he was shocked and chilled by the matter of fact tone in which she spoke of falling in love, not as though it were a subject made holy by mystical exaltations, but as if it were an everyday accident like taking a toss in the hunting-field or spraining an ankle at tennis. She used the sacred word baldly, without reverence or tenderness. It was evident that love meant something quite different to her from what it meant to him. On her lovely, callous lips, the word lost all its illusions; became cold, disheartening, almost terrible.

But, by now, they had reached the lawns where the band had ceased to play, and the crowd was already thinning. He had a feeling that the magic moment for which he had waited so long, so eagerly, was almost over.

"Do you know," she said suddenly, with a brilliant smile that intensified rather than disguised the cruelty of what she said: "until you came up to speak to us just now I'd completely forgotten that we should see you down here? Don't look angry like that, it's much more fun as it is. You must come and play tennis to-morrow—you and your cousin. Is she any good? I'm disgracefully bad, but Alec's nearly first-class . . ."

"Hello, young people!" It was Lady Ernestine who hailed them suddenly like a jolly farmer's boy. "Goin' to hunt this year, Jim?" she asked him with her wide smile, as though she were continuing the conversation that had been broken four years before at Cold Orton Gate. "You've grown out of your pony, haven't you? You must ride ten stone twelve." Her canny blue eyes weighed his figure like a grazier's weighing a beast. "I shall have to go easy myself this season I'm afraid," she added. "Just broke to the world. Well, we're all in the same leaky boat, with Lloyd George talkin' damn silly rot about pheasants and deer-forests. The man's never seen a deer-forest in all his born days. By the way——" she turned quickly to Cynthia—"your father was asking for you. I'd have a look round and find him if I were you. A little bit touchy!" She wagged her head knowingly.

"All right. I suppose I'd better," said Cynthia with a sigh. Once more, as at their first meeting, she looked Jim full in the eyes, and the blue gaze that swept them brought his heart to his lips. "What about to-morrow?" she said quickly. "Shall we say half-past three? Yes, that will be splendid. I believe you play terribly well. Oh yes, you do. . . . The main entrance at half-past three, then? Good-bye!" And she went. She waved her hand: "Good-bye, Aunt Ernestine!"

"Yes, she's lovely, isn't she?" Lady Ernestine answered his thoughts as she stood looking after her niece, pulling on her dogskin gloves. She looked at Jim quizzically, then nodded reflectively and smiled.

"It's time," she said, "to go and get my bicycle. Remember me to your grandmother. Good-bye, Jim."

"Good-bye, Lady Ernestine."

To-morrow. . . .

IX. *Midsummer Nights*

TO-MORROW and to-morrow and to-morrow. . . . Such was the burthen of this midsummer madness. His Wonderland, he reflected, was like Alice's; Jam always to-morrow; never Jam to-day!

Yet the pale night was starlit, for the breeze that blew out the Folville blazon on the keep had washed clean the upper air; Arcturus, setting, red as a spent candle-wick, beyond the squat churchspire; the square of Pegasus tilted emptily over the Castle woods. In the gauzes of the Milky Way, Altair throbbed yellow, slowly creeping toward that quarter of the sky which overhung Cynthia's bedroom: that sky made frosty with fine star-dust; the blood-warm earth veiled in cool mist—as though the ironical providence which flatters lovers had contrived to give his dream the isolation of a vagrant meteor in midmost space. As Jim gazed, yet saw not, his inconscient planet-bound body was borne silently Eastward; the motionless heavens unrolled like a jewelled screen; new stars were born and old ones mistily set, marking the cold drift of time as inexorably as his own hot heart-beats.

But Jim Redlake knew nothing of time. His life was suspended timelessly in the sole show or shadow of immortality that mortals may know. That life—if indeed he were alive; and it seemed to him that he had never lived before—had slipped into a mysterious dimension in which moments were hours, hours moments, the actual and the unreal commingled and equally accepted as in a dream.

How long that dream lasted he neither knew nor cared. By the computation of scientists endorsed by Greenwich its momentary eternity covered a month and four days of the Gregorian calendar. In that higher reality of his consciousness which rejected the arbitrary mathematics of moon and sun, its content consisted of a series of disorderly images and sensual impressions that came and went according as the network of capillaries on his brain's surface flushed or paled.

Such, real and rich as an aura of approaching rapture, was the characteristic smell of the Norman entrance-hall, that odour compact of pot-pourri and stone, of aged wood and beeswax—fit prelude to the vision of Cynthia herself—or rather of a hundred Cynthias: that wraith of lily-pale whiteness, ineffably virginal, so slowly descending the Vanbrugh staircase on her way to dinner, with pearls at her throat, a slim figure of ivory satin shining against powder-blue panelling of eighteenth-century pine; the solemn-eyed Cynthia of the dining-room, at her father's right hand, silvery and sedate, with gleams of crystal and candlelight making darker her amber hair; the Cynthia who glowed like a creamy rose in moonlight—"Be careful, child, don't catch cold!" Lady Essendine called—pacing the paved terrace with her warm arm resting on his, drinking in with slow breath the sweet silence of pallid lawns where motionless moon-shadows of cedar lay like pools of Indian ink; the laughing, all-golden Cynthia, hair loose in the sun and all morning gay in her eyes, who made screaming peacocks spread the eyed iridescence of their tails, or stood on tiptoes like a dancer, with knit brows and tense lips, awaiting the spin of her brother's hurricane serves, or placed her foot momently in Jim's hand as she sprang to her saddle, or, dismounting, filled him with ludicrous jealousy as her soft face nuzzled her chestnut's shining jowl.

She was to be worshipped indeed at altars and in guises as various as the Delian goddess from whom she took her lovely name. Nor always remotely; for soon, like a discarded veil, she threw aside the courtesy title that still hampered and distanced him to Julian's advantage. "I call you 'Jim,' why on earth don't you call me Cynthia like everyone else?" she said.

A rare moment; for, up till then, he had felt just a little out of it, particularly when Julian and she discoursed in the Mayfair dialect, a dialect devoted to personalities in which people, it appeared, were known only by their Christian names. Alas, they had so much in common that Jim couldn't share or penetrate. There were those Russian dancers at Covent Garden, for instance. Marcus Hinton had a box which he kept mainly for the use of his friends. When they raved about Mordkin, Scheherezade, *L'oiseau de feu*, the colour of Bakst, or Pavlova's exquisite shoulders, vague envies possessed him.

"Ah, Pavlova in *Carnaval*," she cried. "The divine little thing! Don't you think so?"

It was wrong, he thought, it was cruel that any beauty with which she was enraptured should be unknown to him.

"I'll play you Carnaval now," Julian cried. "Come quick. We've just time before dressing for dinner."

The dusk was falling; mist deadened the green of the lawns. Like a pack of children they ran breathless to the long drawing-room—all except Alec, who, like his father, detested music—a gravely-proportioned chamber of biscuit-coloured pine panels, with formal Louis Seize furniture in jade-green brocade, and sconces and chandeliers of cascading Venetian crystal reflecting the evening light.

At the end of this room, from a florid medallion of carving by Grinling Gibbons, a young girl, in a delicate crayon by Lawrence, smiled dreamily down, and Cynthia stood beneath her. Julian pulled up the stool to the piano; played Schumann from memory. He was playing for Lucy, he thought. That was all he knew! For the Carnaval Suite, with its tender, heart-breaking gaiety, became, for Jim, from that moment, Cynthia's music.

She stood there so solemnly under the Lawrence drawing, as slenderly delicate and big-eyed as the crayon itself. And over her features, as Julian played and Jim watched her, the memory of the Russians' dance moved like flickers of firelight—now making them sprightly, now languid, now tender, now tragic, now dreamy. For her body, indeed, was the only and exquisite vehicle of the girl's emotion.

"Columbine . . . Harlequin . . . Eusebius . . . Lettres dansantes . . ." Julian murmured between the sections. For Lucy, the soft brown Lucy, curled up like a kitten, her eyes fixed on Julian, who played for her. The dusk fell still deeper; Cynthia and the Lawrence were ghostly. Jim couldn't see her eyes any longer, they grew black and blacker; became pools of darkness, like the empty eyes of a Greek statue, he thought. Ah, now he knew! For the short tennis-frock, high-waisted, falling in folds of a fine white muslin, was a chlamys: he had found her at last—the girl of the Nolan vase!

Oh, Attic shape, fair attitude . . . Bold lover, never, never shalt thou kiss. . . .

"*Papillon* . . ." Julian whispered. And as the fragile staccato tinkled out, through the open window, a ghost-moth came fluttering in, whirled drunkenly round the darkened room in a dizzy dance of its own.

"Papillon! Oh, Julian, look!" Cynthia cried. And the spell was broken, the classic attitude shattered in the antic of a boisterous child.

"Papillon! Oh, look at it!" she cried. They swept into the dance, the mad girl and the dazed moth together, till Julian, surrendering to the new mood, drew down his finger in a sudden swift *glissando*. No more Schumann! Why not Pellissier? And he subsided languorously into one of the Follies' last and most popular sentimentalities.

Moon, moon, serenely shining.
Don't go in too soon!

They were all of them singing the refrain together in the darkling room.

There's such a charm about you
That I can't get on without you.

They were so young . . . so young. . . .

Stealing home through the dusk, with Lucy beside him, in their soft tennis-shoes, they heard in the thick of a hedge-row the sound of a laugh and a feeble scuffle. "Oh, don't do that! You mustn't! I won't have it!" A man's voice said: "Why not?" It was the gallant Dupont, Lucy guessed, making love to Miss Minnet's maid, Edith. Making love! Jim blushed in the dark, took her arm and quickened their pace. He was troubled, and at the same time shamefully moved, by the proximity of this uncouth physical passion as they hurried on toward the doctor's red lamp. For his body did go back, at times, it seemed, to The Grange, to that little room with the African sampler, or the supper-table where stupid tongues still wagged over the Castle garden-party. How lucky, he heard, the Essendine's had been to catch the one fine day for it! Such a drenching August! According to the papers, Aunt Margaret declared, the wettest in living memory. "Just think of that!" she exclaimed.

Of course she had nothing else to think of, and nothing to say unless it were some arch, sly allusion to Lucy and Julian, who had supplanted Mr. Holly as a subject for her vulgar teasing. If she dared to mention Cynthia's name, Jim wouldn't answer for himself. They were all, as a matter of fact, a little awed, a little envious of these daily visits to Thorpe Castle. Even Mrs. Jewell. "You're becoming quite a favourite, aren't you?" she said with a sour smile.

But when sleep came, Jim's soul, which he had left at Cynthia's feet, wandered back, still warm from her presence, to its mortal tenement, and he dreamed things that, waking, he would not even have dared to think.

One anxiety pursued him. What would happen, he wondered, when Julian went on North to Scotland where his father, who didn't shoot, had rented one of the smaller Breadalbane moors? Though he dreaded that day, he shrank from thinking of it until it was almost upon them. They lay idly stretched in the afternoon sun on the flank of the earthwork that crowns the summit of Burrow Hill. The steep sides of the camp fell away at their feet to the valleys of Soar and Wreak; over flat lands hunted by the Quorn they looked to Charnwood Forest. The air was warm with wild thyme; dry gorse-pods crackled in the sun. Julian stretched his long legs and yawned. He was speaking at Lucy.

"What bad luck!" he said. "This time the day after to-morrow I shall be up on Loch Feochan, listening to fishing-stories."

"Lucky devil!" Cynthia drawled. "The heather will be out. Oh, how I adore Glen Shrieven at this time of year!"

Unaware of her cruelty she lazily smiled at Jim; her eyes, puckered with sunlight, burned like sapphires. They dared him to answer.

"I suppose I shall never see you when once Julian's gone," he whispered.

"What nonsense!" She also spoke softly. "D'you mean that you're going to desert me? How horribly mean of you! You'll do nothing of the sort, I warn you. Do you realize you're the only person at Thorpe who saves me from slow death by boredom?"

"If I thought that was true . . ."

"Why, Jim dear, of course it's true. No, I won't say any more. You know perfectly well you're only fishing for compliments. We should never get a four at tennis without you and Lucy," she added brutally.

So that was it, he thought gloomily; she was merely making use of him as a kind of superior servant, a partner to pick up tennis balls. The one small gleam of tenderness he had seemed to detect in her lowered voice was just part of the instinctive guile of her

Folville politeness. He would teach her to keep those tricks for others; she couldn't fool him! Yet, even as his spirit rose, he saw he was beaten. If she used him as a dog he knew that he couldn't resent it so long as she vouchsafed him the privilege of being near her.

"She knows that as well as I do," he reflected bitterly. And indeed, from that moment of promised, unrealized tenderness, her manner toward him became more dictatorial, presuming on his subjection with a cruel delight in seeing just how far he would stand her caprices. Even Alec noticed these vivisectional experiments.

"Good Lord, Jim, I'm damned if I'd stick it," he said. "You treat him," he told her, "as though he were one of the footmen!"

"You mind your own business, Alec," she answered contemptuously.

Even a Folville (of the new generation) it seemed could be rude on occasion. Yet this momentary lapse of manners had the effect of sobering her, and when she next spoke to Jim her voice was as honeyed as her hair.

"I'm sorry," she said, with her great eyes on his, almost humbly. "I'm bad-tempered to-day. It's so hot. And I hate to feel Julian's going"—a bee's sting in the honey!—"It *has* been *such* fun! Don't you think so?"

It was true that the shadow of Julian's departure made them all restless. His mind was so vivid, his spirits so high, his reactions so swiftly incalculable, that his presence had worked like yeast among them; for the Folvilles, left to themselves, had few resources and habitually relied on the liveliness of others for their entertainment. To Jim, Cynthia's moodiness on that last evening had a sinister import. He wondered if she had purposely deceived him in speaking of Julian, had deliberately made her attitude toward him a little too clear. If she wasn't in love with Julian—and who could tell?—she evidently much preferred Julian's company to his. A violet thunderstorm drowned their third set of tennis. It left the court sodden, the players cold and disconsolate. Not that Julian minded. He wanted to have Lucy to himself, to make the most of the rest of this pleasant flirtation; while Alec, who felt that their tennis was below his own standard, could be equally happy practising fancy strokes in the billiard-room or talking horses and cars in the stables and garage. But Cynthia was vexed.

"What a horrible bore!" she said. "The court's quite impossible; the balls are like lead, and Julian's in love, God help him! What *can* we do, Jim? I know: let's go into the garden and eat . . . peaches!"

She laughed; for, just as they fell, her spirits could leap up clear and sparkling as a fountain-jet in the sun. Where the rain lay in pools of light she picked her way lightly, elegantly, swiftly, like some stilted wading-bird. Inside the peach-house dwelt a moist, tropic air. Amid the translucent foliage of trained espaliers overhead huge, pale fruit hung symmetrical, like apples of Eden on trees in a Florentine tapestry. She was smiling, still breathless with hurry, her breast heaving gently; her pale cheeks flushed with the bloom of a ripened peach, and her eyes were greedy.

"The gardener hates anyone picking them but himself, but I don't care. Oh, that one's a beauty!" She strained upward on tiptoe. "I can't reach it. Yes, that one. Thank you, Jim."

The globular fruit lay warm and living in his hand, so ripe that his fingers bruised its downy skin.

"Oh, lovely!" Her white teeth bit into the succulent scented flesh of the peach; the gushing juice glazed her lips to vermilion. "Too lovely. . . . Do try one!" She reached upward again; her body, so lithe, so young, so slender, poised lightly on her toes, like a thing taking flight, in a pose of ineffable grace. Her voice laughed low:

"Mr. Redlake, allow me to present you with a choice sample of fruit from the forbidden tree."

He took it. Warm fingers touched for an instant. He ate: but his eyes could not leave her while her teeth, white as those of a healthy animal, bit lusciously deeper into the perfumed flesh of the fruit, blood-red where it clung to the stone like the flesh of a living thing. The perfume and flesh of the girl, the perfume and flesh of the peach were one. Blood beat in his ears. His fingers were hungry to feel the warmth of her golden skin—to crush its peach-bloom, to bruise its succulent flesh; to possess, to taste, to devour that warm ripeness to its crimson heart. Sight blurred as he gazed. He trembled. "I am mad," he thought: "I am mad!" She must see the madness that was shaking his body and brain, for her eyes still watched him. But no. . . .

"Oh, Adam, Adam," she mocked. "Won't you taste my apple?"

She was smiling, stooping to rinse her fingers in a green-scummed tank.

"Take me away while there's time, Jim darling, before it's too late. I could go on eating them for ever. Why, look, the sun's shining!"

Bold lover, never, never cans't thou kiss. . . .

"Oh, no, it's quite hopeless," said Julian brusquely. "No more tennis for me! If Cynthia and you don't want to listen you needn't come."

He wanted, of course, to have Lucy to himself.

"Come along, Jim," said Cynthia.

Was it some sparkle of malice or jealousy that made her reject Julian's hint? Jim could only obey. They were back, again, in the jade-green, pine-panelled drawing-room; its air now chilled by the rain, cold storm-lights reflected from hanging rods and lozenges of Venetian crystal.

Cynthia shivered. "We must have a fire," she said.

As she knelt to light it, her eyes blinking at the flame, its blaze, shining through the flimsy tennis-frock, defined all her nakedness with a halo of misty gold. She raised her arms high, inviting the heat's caresses, her taper fingers uplifted like those of a priestess, a rapt fire-worshipper. "Ah, that's better," she sighed luxuriously, as she turned and smiled at Jim.

Julian played the prelude to the Second Act of *Tristan*. Lucy knelt beside him. "You remember what I told you?" he whispered, bending toward her, so close that his lips nearly touched her brown hair. She nodded gently in answer, half closing her violet eyes. And Jim remembered too, half bitterly, what Julian had told him at Winchester. This music had been the accompaniment of another romance—the *leit-motiv* of his lady (and, apparently, Lord Essendine) in Madrid. The thought of this barefaced inconstancy made his heart laugh. "How different from mine," he thought.

Yet the music held him: the murmur of the languid fountain, those melancholy, distant horns. How well Julian played, with the passion of a man inspired! It was impossible, Jim thought, that Cynthia should not feel it as he did. As the music rose to the intolerable rapture of the lovers' meeting, he dared, at last, to raise his eyes and look at her. She was seated now with her back to the flickering fire, her long hands clasped round her knees, staring straight in front of her; her mouth solemn, her eyes great pools of darkness deep and inscrutable. She had never, Jim thought, seemed so lovely. Yet her beauty was different. It had lost, for the moment, its high aloofness, discarding the hard mood of imperious flippancy with which she enhanced and mocked at her own divinity. This Cynthia was human, he thought, almost humble, capable of tenderness no less than of that passion which, translated into waves of tumultuous sound, rocked the air that enveloped them. Here was hope, as well as desire. . . .

The music stopped suddenly.

"I can't play any more," said Julian, his voice strangely shaken.

He closed the piano and faced them, his pale face smiling. His hand touched Lucy's. They smiled in each other's eyes.

Next day Julian was gone. Alec drove him to Leicester to pick up a through sleeping-carriage on the Scotch express. Jim found Lucy pale and distracted and rather importantly irritable. The day was ironically brilliant with a bright dry wind, like a day in September.

"We promised to play tennis this evening," Jim warned Lucy eagerly.

"But that's silly," she protested. "Alec's driven into Leicester with Julian. He can't possibly be back; the train doesn't leave till nine. I know they planned to dine somewhere and go to a music-hall, and we can't make a four without him."

"Well, we promised; so I shall go anyway," Jim told her thankfully.

"Oh yes, I'm sure you will. Good luck, darling," said Lucy maliciously.

"Isn't it horrid when people you like go disappearing like this?" Cynthia asked him petulantly. She had made herself difficult from the first. Her manner was short and off-hand.

"You said it would make no difference."

"No difference? What on earth do you mean?"

"To you and me."

"Oh, that! But that isn't what I mean. Are you going to play me singles?"

He beat her, unmercifully. He found acute pleasure in placing balls out of her reach. She hated being beaten, even by a boy.

"I'll give you fifteen," he said.

She refused, and he beat her again. She became outrageous. "The court is still playing dead," she said, "and these balls are rotten. Alec hides all the new ones. These miserable things!" And she viciously sent the half dozen flying sky high, one after another, to fall in the thickets of shrubbery.

"Those balls were quite good," Jim protested.

"I know that. I'm right off my game and I hate it. I wanted to hit something." She laughed at herself: "Well, anyway, they're gone, so you won't be able to beat me again. As a matter of fact we oughtn't to play any longer. I solemnly promised mother I'd go in to tea and talk pretty. Those Bellars people are over. They must almost have finished by now. You'd better come in with me."

"I'm hardly dressed for a party."

"Oh, you needn't come if you don't want to."

In the hall she threw down her racquet and pushed back her hair with a sigh. Jim followed her, through that familiar, aromatic air, to the chamber, half study half drawing-room, which her mother frequented in summer: a bright room, facing her gardens, with masses of comfortable furniture in the worst of taste. There was a painted Italian secretaire infested with costly and useless writing-appliances from Bond Street; the table, where current magazines and the latest books (with their pages uncut) lay in orderly rows that satisfied Lord Essendine's eye, and huge masses of flowers, cut from borders and hot-houses, with whose heavy perfumes Lady Essendine loved to surround herself.

"Oh, here you are, Cynthia darling," she said with a benevolent smile. "And Jim, too? How *nice* of you, Jim! Lady Bellars, Miss Kirkby, you know Jim Redlake? At any rate you know his father. Those charming books! So clever!"

And as Jim, still conscious of his tennis-stained flannels, bowed, she gave him, automatically, a cup of tepid, diluted Lapsang tea. For the Essendines, with a butler, three footmen and un-numbered anonymous maids in the house, could never achieve boiling water.

"I'm afraid it's been standing rather a long time," she said dubiously.

It was perfect, Jim told her; but even as he spoke, she was asking Cynthia:

"Did you have lovely tennis, darling?"

"Yes, lovely, darling. Jim gave me fifteen and I beat him," she lied angelically, without raising her eyes.

"The Conference is bound to break down," said Lord Essendine in the booming, melancholy tones which he adopted whenever he talked politics. "The Welshman has tasted blood. They've been at it two months, and I gather they're not much forrader."

"Another election!" Lord Bellars murmured timidly. He was a little old man, like a white dormouse, with astonished, watery eyes, very pompous in public, but now, in George Essendine's presence, almost humble. "Another election!" he said, being concerned not so much with the vanishing privileges of his caste as with the fact that the political emergency would interrupt the book on "Norman Fonts in the Counties of Rutland and Leicestershire" which, like a dormouse's hoard, he had been compiling.

"Have you seen any flying?" the mature Miss Kirkby asked Jim eagerly.

"No, I'm afraid I haven't," he said. "Have you?"

She hadn't either. "We've not been up to town since May. But it must be too thrilling. The Willows airship flew right over London, you know."

Cynthia sat and listened maliciously. Not a word of Miss Kirkby's small-talk nor Jim's feeble replies escaped her. Her mother and Lady Bellars discussed the Primrose League. In the background Lord Essendine's political voice boomed on monotonously like a clockwork foghorn drearily proclaiming dangerous shoals.

"Will he never stop?" Jim wondered; for by this time Miss Kirby's conversation had come to earth and remained there, completely deflated.

"For myself," Lord Essendine declared, "I'm prepared to fight to the very last ditch."

His neighbour sighed, shook his head, despondently, and rose. "Anne, my dear," he said, "I think . . ."

"Must you really go? So soon?" Lady Essendine entreated.

"John works at his book in the evening, Janet," said Lady Bellars impressively.

"Yes, of course. I quite understand. Lych-gates, isn't it? Fascinating things!"

"Fonts," Lady Bellars answered reproachfully. "Norman Fonts."

"How dreadful of me! I must ask him to tell me all about them some day, if you think he'd condescend to my ignorance. Lord Bellars," she said, "it's too shabby, the way in which George has monopolised you, just when we're all burning to hear about your fonts. *So* nice of you to come all this way to see us!"

They went; and Jim clutched at this chance of escaping too. The whole afternoon had been a disquieting failure. Cynthia's mood was so queer, so elusive, so full of a wayward mockery. But when they were out in the air again she refused to release him.

"I won't let you desert me like this," she declared. "You must stay to dinner. Unless you find me too boring, of course. Have you seen any flying?" she mimicked the wan eagerness of poor Miss Kirkby to perfection. "I haven't seen any myself, but it must be *too* thrilling. He flew right over London. Think of it! Oh, damn . . . what a life, what people! I want to go mad. Let's go mad, like March hares, Jim, if only to see what it feels like! What *can* we do? Tell me, quickly!"

"Better look for those balls in the shrubbery, I should think," Jim answered glumly.

"Oh, Jim dear, why are you always, always, so serious?"

She took his arm. Her outburst toward the Bellars, appeared to have done her good. Walking rapidly arm in arm, without purpose, always talking excitedly, as though her silence in the Bellars' presence had pent up her spirits, she had brought him, at last, to the lowermost terrace of the garden, where the black clipped yews of the maze confronted them.

"D'you remember Mr. Holly's face?" she asked, with a laugh. "It would have looked so much better, wouldn't it, if he hadn't explained? Don't you think so? What an odious little man!"

"Well, they did really get lost, you know. Lucy hated it. She told me so afterwards."

"Naturally they got lost. Mr. Holly intended to get lost. It's quite easy. You try it yourself."

"Of course, *you* know the way. Alec's told me that you and he can go through it blindfold."

"So we can. Quite easily. I tell you what—have a try for yourself.

Just go where I tell you. You start here, and I'll promise to get you straight to the middle."

"That's all very well. What about getting out again?"

She laughed. "Don't you trust me? Oh, Jim, what an awful coward!"

"All right. Fire away." And he entered the narrow opening.

"Straight ahead at first," she called. "Now turn right . . . now left . . . left again. That's splendid. Now bear to the right. Don't turn. Go straight on."

Her imperious voice directed him through a tangle of tortuous instructions. The black alleys were warm and dead with the bitter smell of clipped yew. On and on he went, till her voice sounded faint and distant. "Now you're nearly there," she called; and, at last: "There! What did I tell you?"

In the heart of the maze was a small chamber, six feet square. A leaden Cupid languished there like a prisoner.

"Do you like it in there?" she asked. "He's rather sweet, isn't he?"

"Yes. I've had quite enough of him now though. How do I get out?"

"Get out? My dear child, that's your business. I've done what I said I'd do."

"But you promised to show me the way out as well," he called.

"Oh, Jim, how *can* you say so? I did nothing of the sort. It's quite easy. Just try."

"You treacherous little beast!"

She was laughing. "It's perfectly simple. When you know how to do it," she added.

Her laughter maddened him. "I'm not going to be beaten," he thought. "It will serve her right if I show her." And he set off, deliberately, trying to recover from memory the course he had followed.

At first all went well. "I shall be out in a moment," he told himself, "and let her know what I jolly well think of her." He had spoken too soon. A black, thick-set barrier faced him. "That's no good," came her taunting voice. "Try again—if you can." He retraced his steps, easily now, for he had kept account of his turns. "You're getting quite clever. Better luck next time!" she cried.

But next time was no better; an identical barrier faced him and sent him back again.

And so it went on and on. Whenever he felt most hopeful some new blind alley stopped him.

"You were on the right track last time," she mocked. "Have another shot at it!"

He set off again, doggedly. The light had begun to fail; the close alleys grew dark; four, five times more, defeated, he groped his way back to the leaden prisoner. By now his temper had grown ragged, the more so as her laughter betrayed how much she enjoyed herself.

"Are you going to keep me waiting all evening?" she enquired maliciously. "The sun's set, and I ought to be dressing for dinner, you know."

"Go and dress if you want to," he told her. "The sooner you go the better."

"And miss all the fun?" she tormented him.

He set off again, in a flush of anger; was again frustrated. "I wish to God you would go," he said. "You put me off."

"There's no need to be rude, Jim," she reproved him. "Just calm yourself for a moment and have a last try."

"I shan't move a step till you're gone," he said.

"Are you going to stay there all night?"

"I shall stay here as long as I want to," he told her fiercely.

"You mean: as long as *I* want you to?" she sweetly echoed.

He decided that he wouldn't answer the hateful creature; settled down, in a childish sulk, to wait for her to go.

"Don't lose heart, Jim," she mocked him. "I've never known you sulk before. Little troubles like this show one's real character marvellously. Don't you think so?"

Dead silence. . . . She could go to the devil for all he cared!

She laughed softly. "Will you ask me, politely, to come and fetch you, and say you're sorry you've been rude?" He kept obstinate silence. "Well, if you won't answer, I suppose I must come without any invitation. Your manners are awful."

He stood, mutely resentful. He heard her light footfall approaching. She was humming to herself that maudlin song of the Follies', the one that Julian had played, now near with no more than two hedges between them, now fading away. And then, of a sudden, she appeared in the gap before him, on her mouth a provocative smile that sent the blood to his head.

"You little devil!" he cried. He caught her arms roughly.

"What are you doing?" she whispered. Her eyelids drooped, she was pale. "What are you doing, Jim?"

What was he doing? He didn't know. He only knew that within his angry hands was the soft, peach-bloomed skin of her arms, the ripe fruit they had longed to crush on the day before. Her faint perfume enveloped, intoxicated him. Her face was averted, ghostly. As she turned he could see that brown speck of pigment at the corner of her lips.

"This . . ." he said in a fierce hushed voice. He caught her limp body to him. It was soft, warm, small, like the body of a child; her lips, like the heart of the peach, vermilion. He kissed her lips.

"Jim, Jim . . ." she whispered.

"I worship you, utterly. . . . Oh, Cynthia . . ."

She opened her eyes and gazed into his. They were softened, dreamy. He was blinded. Intolerable loveliness! At least she did not try to escape him. With a sigh that was like a shudder she closed her eyes again. Her pale, perfect face, as he saw it, unblinded, was calm, pure, childlike—the face of a blond Tuscan saint depicted in ecstasy.

That evening, in the dusk, they parted without one word; with nothing between them, indeed, but the lingering contact of fingers that were loth to unclasp. It seemed to Jim as if Cynthia were strangely quiet and subdued; as though she, also, were shattered as himself by this experience unique in the history of mankind—this marvel which had fallen first on them of all living creatures.

Shrinking from the sight of ordinary things, the sound of familiar voices, he decided to evade them by entering the house by way of the surgery. A dim light illumined the ceiling behind the pine partition. As he lifted the latch a voice challenged him: "Who's that?" the doctor called.

"Only me," Jim answered.

"You're late, Jim. They've finished supper. What a colour you've got, boy!"

"I've been running."

"Well, run while you can."

The old man smiled. In the flame of a Bunsen burner he was holding a test-tube three quarters full of amber liquid; his bony fingers turned it from side to side in the blue flame. It boiled. Where the fluid had once been clear hung a cloudy band.

"Do you see that?" he asked.

"Yes. What does it mean?"

"All or nothing. We shall know in a moment." He reached for a drop bottle. "Acetic Acid," he said. "One drop will show us. If the cloud disappears, it's phosphates: if it thickens, albumen. The difference between life and death." The drop of acid fell; the white cloud thickened.

"I thought so," the doctor said coldly. He held up the tube to the light. "That means Chronic Bright's Disease. Well, well . . ."

"Is it terribly serious?"

"In this case, yes—if anything's really serious. A matter of a year or two." He turned out the light.

Life and Death! Those words meant nothing to Jim at that moment. He had that within him which transcended either. With a hurried excuse he wished his grandfather good-night, and stole up the creaking stairs to his room where, still fasting, yet sensible of no common hunger, he abandoned himself to a rapture of wonder and worship. Was this indeed the room in which he had dreamed against hope, so long? Even these bare walls seemed transformed, enriched by this miracle. And Cynthia too! How more utterly lovely, he thought, was this new, this incredibly tender incarnation of that spirit once so proud, so imperious, so scornful! "How changed I am," he thought. How the world was changed, made his, to command, by virtue of a single kiss! He lay living it over again and again in the dark.

In the middle of the night he lit his candle and wrote:

Ah, had I guessed that but one kiss
  Could kindle in the blood a flame
Fiercely tempestuous as this,
  Putting pale Sirius to shame—

Ah, had my ways been cold and wise,
  Then had I never known this fever
Of beauty that shall blind my eyes
  And burn upon my lips for ever:

These lips which have so hallowed grown
  That even poetry might bruise
The bloom of beauty they have known,
  Twisting them to her baser use:

These eyes that never have known rest
  Pursuing beauty's form and hue,
Now beggared of their holy quest,
  Seeing, in all beauty, only you!

"Oh Jim," she said next day, and her eyes were soft, "nobody has ever written poetry for me before!"

"There is no need for it," he said, as he crumpled his verses. "You yourself are poetry!"

She smiled, but though she was flattered by the extravagant words, her mind was more realistic.

"I want to know," she said, "the moment, the very first moment you thought you loved me."

"I never thought I loved you. I always knew."

"Then tell me when first you knew."

"At the meet at Cold Orton, I suppose. Years and years ago. That's when I saw you first."

"Oh no, that's ridiculous," she protested, "you were just a child then. You're only imagining."

He laughed. "Well, perhaps I am. Yes. I remember; I thought you were horrid."

"That makes it much better. Now, try to be honest. You must."

"At Eton, then. Yes, that's the real truth. You were wearing the thing you wore at the garden-party."

"That horrible rag? How *could* you? I simply detest it."

"I dreamt about you for weeks. It was awful: I couldn't sleep for thinking of you. But what does that matter now?"

To her, apparently, it still mattered immensely. She took a delight in recalling that day and others, all the wasted days they had spent together since she came to Thorpe, those days when they had looked at each other with different eyes.

"But if you loved me then," she said, "why didn't you tell me so?"

"I was shy—most horribly shy. I was jealous of Julian."

"Of Julian?" She laughed. "How ridiculous!"

"Of everybody—everyone you spoke to. It seemed . . . I don't know . . . so hopeless."

"Poor darling!" she said. "But now that's all over, isn't it?"

"Thank God, yes!"

He assured himself of this so many times every day: when he watched her, in Alec's company, with hungry eyes; when they wandered together, as on that first night, to the wicket in the park-wall where they parted in the dusk, were so often to part; in the silence of autumnal woods whose secrecies they penetrated together; in the empty jade-green drawing-room to which they so often stole, peopled now by no more than the ghosts of their once-gay company. Yet, even when she yielded her body to his arms, her lovely lips to his kisses, he was haunted for ever by a vague, inexplicable hunger. At the zenith of his exaltation he knew that this was not all; the possession that contented her could not satisfy him. And above them, even in these rarest moments, a shadow impended: the gloom of that old hopelessness of which he had spoken, a sense of profound insecurity. She was his, she told him. How long would she be his?

"When we go back to town," she would sometimes murmur carelessly. He hated the formula. When those words came into her mind he begged her never to utter them.

"But we shall go back, darling," she said. "It's much better to face the truth. And besides, you know perfectly well it will make no difference."

"Won't it?" he asked.

"Must I tell you again?" Her eyes returned the assurance he demanded unquestioningly.

"I wonder."

"Oh, Jim, you look just like Hamlet," she said.

One morning September hoar-frost lay on the lawns. A long trail of tell-tale footmarks marked his approach. It was a day of serenest loveliness. Lady Essendine's Michaelmas daisies hung low like a mist of amethyst in the borders where lazy-winged admiral butterflies sunned their bloom. He found Alec distracted, impatient; the air of the house astir with unusual activity.

"Hullo, Jim," he called out briskly. "If you're looking for Cynthia I'm afraid you're wasting your time."

"Why, whatever do you mean?"

"Urgent orders from General Headquarters. Some political crisis or other. That damned Conference, I suppose. Father's rushed up to town already by train this morning: the baggage and women and children to follow to-morrow. Do you want a lift to London? If you like I can drive you."

"But where's Cynthia?" Jim asked.

"God knows. I suppose she's packing."

"I must see you to-night," he entreated when he found her. "This is just too awful."

"Yes, isn't it?" she agreed; but for all her regret he could see that she felt the excitement that Alec had shown. "And I really don't see, Jim darling," she said, "how I can possibly escape this evening. Mother's half off her head; that wretched Mrs. Hadley's so slow. Come to supper anyway. We shan't any of us be dressing. And then, perhaps, afterwards . . ."

"Is it only 'perhaps'? Of course, I shall be in the way."

"Well, you *needn't,* you know." She was almost scornful. "If you dont want to come . . ."

"Oh, Cynthia, you know what I mean!"

It was just as he thought. At supper Lady Essendine sat with a preoccupied air. Not even her inherited manners could make her a good hostess that evening. "Such a nuisance!" she said, "with my borders looking just at their best. Do tell your grandmother that she's welcome to all the Michaelmas daisies you like to pick. The chrysanthemums too . . ." After supper, politely excusing herself, she took possession of Cynthia.

"You *see* . . ." Cynthia's eyes told him helplessly. "What did I say?"

They shook hands, at the doorway, formally. Lady Essendine stood waiting. Not even a kiss!

And next day Thorpe Castle was empty of all living souls but a few bored servants left behind, under old Mrs. Hadley, to cover the carpets with druggetting and drape with white dustcloths pianos and chairs and pictures, as dead as a horny chrysalis from which the butterfly has flown.

"We shall feel quite lost now that the family's gone, shan't we, Edith?" said Miss Minnet plaintively.

"Yes, miss, it feels dead-like, don't it?" Edith replied.

She, too, had her sorrows. She was thinking of Mr. Dewpoint.

BOOK THREE

THE OTHER SIDE

I. *Lupus Street*

ON THE last day of September Jim rode over to Cold Orton to say good-bye to the Malthuses. The wide lands smelt of winter already; black cohorts of lapwings wheeled drearily screaming under a steely sky. In the study of the Vicarage, its windows wide open to the raw air, Mr. Malthus himself, in his fringed clerical collar, with his lank wisps of blown hair, his lined, pinched, but so carefully shaven face, resembled nothing on earth so much as a dismal, black-coated scarecrow, left desolately flapping in the peewit-haunted air. Yet he glowed when he spoke:

"I'm so glad you've made up your mind, Jim, at last," he said. "To tell you the truth, we've all been a little unhappy about you. We're fond of you, you know. We regard you as one of the family." And a gleam of kindliness illumined his pallid, ascetic features, like sunlight on snow. "We shall miss you, of course," he went on, "though, this summer, you've been so gay that we haven't seen much of you at Cold Orton. I'm afraid, in any case, we shall have to look forward to rather a lonely winter. It's inevitable, I suppose. When the young birds are fledged they must fly. I only wish sometimes," he added with a faint wistfulness, "that they wouldn't fly quite so far. Mark arrived in South Africa yesterday, by the way. He sent us a cable—extravagant young man! With you in London, of course, it will be quite different. I'm glad of that, if only for your grandfather's sake. He's not looking any too well, Jim. He's aged, rather suddenly. And you owe him so much. In this life, one mustn't evade obligations, must one?"

"Of course not," Jim agreed. "I feel that just as much as you do. But I don't really want to be a doctor any more than I did," he confessed. "I still want to write, you know."

"Never mind!" Mr. Malthus smiled kindly. "If you're destined to write, my dear boy, you'll write. Have no fear about that. But now that you've made up your mind to this business, you'll make a good job of it, won't you?"

"I shall have a jolly good try," Jim told him.

"Well, that means that you will. If you're ever in any doubt or difficulty you'll write to me, won't you? No matter what it is. Don't be shy, just because I'm a parson!"

Behind their great circular lenses his weak eyes shone as though there were tears in them. He slipped his arm round Jim's shoulder and patted him nervously. The sleeve was green-black and frayed at the cuff for all Mrs. Malthus's darning.

"Come along and have tea," he said, "and say good-bye to the girls."

In the room that had once been a schoolroom, now dismantled, its sad north windows still dominated by the spiked candelabra of the monkey-puzzle tree, they sat down to tea—a regular schoolroom tea of toast and dripping. The atmosphere was still haunted by memories of Jim's childhood; still smelt, as in bygone days, of stone-flagged passages, bread and butter, and lavatories—how different, he thought, from the Essendines' spacious apartments, though those, God knew, were sufficiently desolate now! But the Malthus household, unchanged as it was in essentials, had strangely shrunken; for Paul, by the grace of heaven, was still up at Oxford; the blackness of Africa had swallowed the adventurous Mark; while Christopher had found his way, by that Providence that watches over the sons of poor parsons, to a desk in a Nottingham insurance office. But the girls were still there, and likely enough to remain there; still busily returning from their work in the house and the parish to welcome him with their old, frank, sisterly warmth. If ever he had known a home, Jim thought, then this was it.

Catherine walked to the garden gate with him, very tall and slim, her calm face reddened like a ripening hip with exposure to sun and wind.

"Do put on a coat," Jim begged her, "or you'll catch cold."

"Me? Catch cold?" she laughed, "I *never* catch cold. We're none of us hothouse plants, Jim!"

(Under the glass lights at the Castle the peaches had all been picked; their curled leaves turned yellow and dropped in a green-scummed tank. Why was it that Cynthia never answered his letters? In London, now . . .)

"In London," Catherine echoed his thought, "you'll be quite at home. So many friends. I suppose you'll see lots of the Essendines?"

"I hope so," he said. How the wintry sky mocked that word! He was seized with a sudden desire to tell Catherine everything; to free himself, once and for all, of his secret duplicity, of the falseness which had perjured his conscience when he talked with her father and mocked at the doctor's innocent joy in his choice of profession. "Do you think it's for his sake," he wanted to say, "that I've sacrificed the idea of Oxford and Julian? Do you think that I honestly care a brass button for medicine? Not a bit of it! I'm going to London for one reason only—because I love Cynthia Folville and can't live away from her. *Now* what do you think of me?"

But, of course, those words were not spoken. They melted like snow in the warmth of Catherine's frank eyes. It was better, he thought, as well as easier to hold his secret, to appear, however unjustly, in the guise of a martyr to that sense of duty which the Malthuses cherished.

"Good-bye, Catherine," he said, as he took her hand. "Why, you're positively freezing! You'll think of me sometimes, won't you?"

"I shall think of you often, Jim."

He jumped to the saddle and rode off rapidly over the sere pastures.

"A nice girl," he thought, "but how different—heavens, how different!"

That afternoon, for the last time, he made pilgrimage to the gap in the timber where first he had met Cynthia. He found it had been rudely repaired with barbed wire.

Yes, times were changing. For better or worse he had been born into a period in which the whole *tempo* of human life was suddenly accelerated, a restless age, yet not out of tune with his spirit's own restlessness: as witness, next day, the brand-new, shining taxi-cab, the first of its kind in which he had ever ridden, that carried him so quickly to the lodging which had been engaged for him in a nice, quiet street (so they said) on the outskirts of Bloomsbury, a bare five-minutes' walk from the Medical School of St. Luke's, the hospital his grandfather had "walked" forty years before.

On his way from the station in this chariot of progress they were met, and hindered, by another sign of the times: a straggling procession of females with earnest faces, respectably but dowdily dressed, who swarmed, like bedraggled bees, in the wake of a tricolour flag—mauve, white and green—upheld by an elderly woman whose costume resembled (yet, surely, could not have been) that of Lady Ernestine Folville. The driver of the taxi pulled up to let them pass, communicating a look of intense disgust to Jim.

"Them suffragettes!" he explained. "They're becoming a bleeding nuisance. What they want, I say, is a couple of youngsters apiece. Then they'd keep their mouths shut, the same as my missis does. What *they* want to be is put down. Votes for women!" He spat scornfully as he crashed in his bottom gear and the car jerked on through the rain into the Gray's Inn Road.

On that autumn evening the aspect of Lupus Street was not encouraging. Its northern side, in which Jim's lodgings were situated, had seen better days, its regular façade presenting the appearance of an early Victorian respectability gone down in the world. To be more precise, the respectable world had left it deserted some half a century before, to be invaded by hordes that overflowed from the congeries of mean streets amid which St. Luke's Hospital played its charitable part. Its southern side had long since abandoned all genteel pretensions, the discreet lower stories having been pierced by the bleared shop-windows of small grocers, greengrocers, cobblers, picture-framers, fried-fish sellers, pork-butchers and vendors of the multifarious cheap rubbish on which the inhabitants of the northern side appeared to subsist.

On the Saturday night on which Jim arrived, its confusion was further complicated by an open market of barrows and stranded fruit-carts whose naphtha-flares, hissing in the rain, above a hesitant stream of shawled women, haggling and fingering, and salesmen bawling the cheap virtues of their goods, gave the impression of some hideous and sinister carnival of despair. To eyes so accustomed to the sweet silences and solitudes of Thorpe Folville there was something almost intimidating in the sheer multitude of this seething, pullulating activity. The smell of the crowd and its foodstuffs burdened the air; they clung and crawled and buzzed about windows and barrows as though their slow feet were stuck to the viscous pavements like those of sick flies on a flypaper.

By contrast with the flares of the market and the lights in shop windows, Jim's side of the street seemed to cower and withdraw itself into relative darkness. The greater part of it had long since been given over to working-class tenants who lived their mysterious lives detached in basements and floors and attics and single, crowded apartments. In the midst, a small portion, distinguished from the rest by lowered blinds and unbroken window-panes, whitened steps, and even, here and there, a polished brass bell-push or door-knocker, preserved a prim air of lower middle-class decency. It was at one of these houses that Jim's taxi dubiously stopped.

"Number thirty-nine?" said the taximan. "Well, here you are! It's the first time I've ever driven a fare to this street," he added, superbly—so superbly, indeed, that Jim overtipped him yet dared not suggest his carrying the luggage to the door.

He rang, and a woman opened. "Mr. Redlake?" she asked.

She was a bustling body, neatly dressed, with her copper-coloured hair in a bang, her big face congested, Jim hoped, with the kitchen fire. She ran to the head of the basement stairs and shouted shrilly:

"Major! Give Mr. R. a hand with his luggage, will you?"

From below came a growl; then the aperture of the stairs delivered, with difficulty, a head that, by rights, should have been bald, but was decorated, in fact, with a series of thin, black wisps, swept up from the nape of a red neck and plastered with geometric precision over a scalp like a peeled potato. The body which followed this head was thick-set and hirsute, displayed rather than concealed by a low-necked gymnastic singlet, and girt about a noble, unshameable paunch by a wide leather belt with a regimental buckle.

"This is Sergeant-Major Pooley . . . me 'usband!" said the landlady proudly, like an old-time chairman introducing a music-hall turn. "Here's Mr. Redlake. *You* know . . ."

The Sergeant—or Major, as Mrs. Pooley invariably called him—saluted smartly, with that excessive quiver of the hand which is peculiar to the Brigade of Guards; and Jim saw that his upper lip was transfixed, as it were, by a skewer of waxed moustache, and that the stripes of hair, whose origins he had observed, were disposed over either temple in a ravishing curl.

"Now, up with the gentleman's kit!" said his wife peremptorily. "Second floor. You know as well as I do." The Major obeyed.

On the whole it might have been worse. It was a long, narrow room, divided unsymmetrically at the back by a lath partition behind which a smaller compartment revealed a single bed and an iron wash-hand-stand with exiguous basin and bowl and a gargantuan "chamber" heavily decorated with roses.

"All aired and clean sheets. You could eat your dinner off them," Mrs. Pooley hotly declared, as though Jim had questioned it. She turned up the by-pass of the incandescent gas-light, of which, together with a vague mustiness, the whole room smelt faintly, revealing a carpet frayed by excess of sweeping, a suite of mahogany furniture, including a collapsible sofa, upholstered in red rep, and an old-fashioned fireplace, of gracious proportions, surmounted by a baroque mirror with a signed photograph of Miss Lottie Collins in front of it, and flanked, quite unnecessarily, Jim thought, until the Major in a moment of abstraction made use of one, by a pair of elegant and highly polished brass spittoons.

"Well, there you are!" Mrs. Pooley panted triumphantly. "I've not lit a fire because folk know what they like and what they can run to."

Jim shivered. "I think I'd like one," he said.

"One and sixpence a day. Got a match, Major? Trust a man!" Her voice sank sepulchrally. "While I light it," she wheezed, "you'd better show Mr. R. the W."

Returning from this mystery, at which point the Major abandoned him, Jim found his landlady, her face more congested than ever, polishing that of Miss Lottie Collins with her apron.

"Best silkstone," she said, "not a bone in it. Now, what about supper? You must be peckish."

"Well, whatever you like, Mrs. Pooley," Jim began.

"Pardon!" Mrs. Pooley bowed. "It's not what *I* like, Mr. Redlake. Tastes differ. It's my place to satisfy." She drew a deep breath. "Cold 'am, cold tongue, pork-pie, polony, 'amaneggs, baconaneggs—or what about a prime chump medium chop with extras and mild Cheshire to follow?" She reeled off the list with a positively appetising fluency. "All 'andy!" she said, "the Major nips over the other side in no time. You've only to state it!"

A prime chump medium chop with extras, Jim thought, sounded excellent.

"Ah, but *what* will you wet it with?" she asked with a luscious smile. "Don't mention bottled stuff, Mr. Redlake, unless it be Guinness. If it's beer, you can trust the Major. A pint of bitter? Don't mention it. He can kill two birds with one stone. Trust a Grenadier for that. There's just one thing I'd ask you," she added mysteriously, as she turned in the doorway. "If you don't mind, tread quiet. The floor's thin, and it gets on Miss Moger's nerves. I once had a gentleman here who made use of a punching-ball. A nice gentleman, too." She shook her head, "but of course, we *'ad* to shift 'im. She's that sensitive, you know, is Miss Moger—'igh-strung, you might say. But can you wonder?"

Jim couldn't—or, rather, could do nothing else. Apart from the ludicrous suggestion of a rhyme, which invested Miss Moger with something ogreish, he hadn't the least idea who or what this super-sensitive lady might be. However, it wasn't long before Mrs. Pooley had defined the nature and most intimate habits of all his fellow-lodgers at thirty-nine Lupus Street. She began her instructions that evening as Jim settled down to the prime medium chump-chop (with extras) which the Major had nipped over to fetch from what—with a sense of the gulf that separates light from darkness—she described as "the other side." Not only did the Major nip over to fetch it, he nipped upstairs with it, so rapidly as almost to justify his gymnastic singlet, laying the cloth on the round mahogany table with the precision of a Grenadier's belongings at a kit-inspection, and adding to the whole a touch of barbaric military ornament in a round metal cruet-stand of vast proportions whose compartments bristled with no less than seven glass vinaigrettes, all, happily, empty.

This erection, which had historical and artistic affinities with the Albert Memorial and whose appearance signified the beginning of each session, like the mace in Parliament, overshadowed Jim's meals during all his stay in Lupus Street. As he ate the first of them that night Mrs. Pooley stood beaming over him. Determined, apparently, that if he didn't enjoy each mouthful it shouldn't be her fault, she kept up a rhapsodical commentary on the virtue of each article of food as he touched it.

"Hy-gy-ennic Bread!" she declared. "My last medical gentleman wouldn't touch no other. What's more, I don't blame him. Them bakers is mostly foreigners. Such a sweet, nutty flavour! . . . No arsenic in this beer, Mr. Redlake! Lovely, isn't it? Look at the colour! . . . Well, well, on my word, you'd think that the Major had sharpened the knife on purpose, the way that chop cuts, wouldn't you? Just a shade on the light side, perhaps, for a 'medium'? Well, I don't know. No, I doubt if you'd better that at any chop-house in London. Just like butter, isn't it? Quite up to our standard, in fact. And that's not a low one, either. The kind of folk I get here, Mr. Redlake," she explained, "professional people and medical gentlemen like yourself, know what's what—they don't like to have their meals thrown at them, do they? Why, come to that, I doubt if there's a lady living who's a finer judge of chop, cutlet, fillet or Porterhouse than our Miss Moger. Well, you see she's been used to the best. A lady by birth! Can you wonder?"

Jim continued to do so, blankly. He was wondering about many things—as, for instance, if any human ingenuity short of rudeness could rid him of Mrs. Pooley, and if, even though he didn't see Cynthia, he could manage, that evening, to see as much as the outside of Essendine House. The "other side" was still swarming, in spite of the rain, when, armed with a latchkey, he made his way over the sticky pavements in the direction of Grosvenor Square. The wet lengths of Holborn and New Oxford Street shone like a sullen river; their pavements were dense with an aimless, umbrellaed crowd. Slowly moving or languidly peering in the closed shop-windows, their pale, lamp-lit features engrossed in their own unimaginable desires, they seemed almost to belong to some species different from himself. "Stony-hearted Oxford Street indeed!" he thought, as he stalked westward through them. In all his life he had never felt quite so lonely.

The vastness of Grosvenor Square gaped emptily before him: a dim lake girt with unscaleable cliffs of stucco and pillared porticoes. He hadn't the faintest idea of the number of Essendine House—quite naturally, for, of course, Essendine House had no number: it was taken for granted that those who had business there would know it without one, and that people who didn't know it had no business to want it. After five minutes' search he encountered a lonely policeman who stood shining like an ebony statue in his wet cape beneath a bleared lamp. He appeared to regard both Jim and his motives with deep suspicion. "Essendine House?" he repeated contemptuously; then jerked his head backwards: "That's it—just behind you!"

Of all empty mansions this seemed the most utterly deserted; the doors of the portico were shut with an air of complete finality; all the blinds were lowered; not a glimmer of light showed anywhere; it was impossible to believe that anyone so vivid as Cynthia had ever inhabited it.

"And what do *you* want with Essendine House?" the constable suddenly enquired, frightening him into guilty consciousness.

"They're friends of mine," Jim explained, with small hopes of being believed.

"Oh, that's it, is it? Well, if you'll take my advice, you'll move on, young man."

The advice was excellent for the rain had increased to a downpour.

"The house seems to be empty," Jim said. "I thought . . ."

"Of course it's empty. The family's away. That's why I'm here, keeping an eye on it. Those suffragettes: they've got a down on his Lordship. If you'll take my advice," . . . he repeated.

This time Jim took it gladly. As he tramped back to Lupus Street through the malignant deluge, his heart was possessed by a queer mingling of despair and relief. It was cruel of Cynthia never to have told him that they were going away; yet, perhaps, this explained why she hadn't answered his letters—those dense pages of burning words, intersprinkled with verses, that he had posted so hopefully day after day at Thorpe Folville. Up till now he had assuaged his pained disappointment by imagining that her silence was dictated by prudence, that their precious secret might be endangered if she replied; that she was patiently, faithfully waiting for his arrival in London. This discovery gave the whole matter a new complexion. Perhaps they had left their town house as soon as they reached it; perhaps, at this moment, his accumulated reams of devotion lay unforwarded behind those closed doors! And where had she gone? It was more than a week later that he read in the *Morning Post* the formal announcement that the Earl of Essendine and Viscount Folville were returning to London from Pau; the Countess of Essendine and Lady Cynthia Folville would shortly follow them.

In the meantime the complicated ways of his new life engrossed him: to begin with, the dreary preliminaries of his curriculum, conducted in the dim lecture-theatres, laboratories and dissecting-room of St. Luke's Medical School, in an odour of stale vitiated air, air pungent with chlorine or sleepy with alcohol, air made nauseous by the sickly emanations of pickled mortality. The School of St. Luke's, though efficient, had never been fashionable like that of Bart's or St. George's. Its students were drawn from a class to which his Wykehamist detachment made him feel that he didn't belong—one of earnest spectacled young men or aggressively showy young men with elaborate waistcoats who arrived there, importantly, from schools of which Jim had never even heard, boisterously professing the traditional philistinism of the medical student in things that, according to Winchester, were simply not done.

He was more at home nursing his private snobbishness in the snug rooms in Lupus Street than in the Hospital Common Room. After all, what did anything matter as long as Cynthia was away? And indeed, when once he had tactfully purged it of the embellishments that were Mrs. Pooley's particular pride and accustomed himself to the smells of cooking that rose from the basement, his room on the second floor was comfortable and even entertaining, commanding, as it did, the eager and multifarious activities of the "other side." Mrs. Pooley was proud of her efficiency as the perfect landlady; the Major, though embarrassingly punctilious in his observance of military etiquette, an excellent valet.

During Jim's first week he made the nodding acquaintance of his fellow lodgers with the exception of Miss Moger. At the moment, the ground-floor being unlet, there were only two of them.

The second-floor back, a neighbour of almost confusing propinquity, was a fragile, dark wisp of a girl named Miss Cowley, who worked in a city office and was therefore invisible between the hours of eight-thirty and half-past five, at either extreme of which she might be met in a hurry on the way upstairs or down. Miss Cowley was anæmic—as God knows she had reason to be in the gas-lit prison where she clattered her typewriter keyboard—with the result that whenever Jim saw her she was out of breath and gave the impression of some delicate, hard-hunted animal. In her way she was pretty, with the pathetic prettiness of ill-health and youth, with her dark, gazelle eyes made blacker by the shadows that encircled them, her incredibly fragile ankles, and the old ivory of the skin which she liberally exposed on her slender arms and throat. She had beautiful teeth, as Jim knew, for her nose was too narrow, and the short upper lip exposed them even when her small mouth did not smile. A creature pursued and therefore, under other circumstances, pursuable. But Miss Cowley, perhaps aware, with the small game's instinct, of the pursuit which her helplessness invited, was all timid discretion. Though she smiled at Jim—unless it were her short upper lip that betrayed her into the semblance of a smile—when they met on the stairs she lowered her great eyes and avoided him. There was even something appealing in the intenseness of her respectability—in the worn little animal, hunted too, whose skin, with its tail in its mouth, she clasped round her thin neck; in the shabby black handbag she clasped tight to her breast, as though she feared it would be stolen; in—alas!—the sad little penny magazines, paper patterns of "Paris models" gratis, which she dragged home so greedily to the second floor back, enriching her solitary meals of home-brewed tea and anæmic pastry with glittering visions of thwarted cosmopolitan vice and humble virtue triumphant. Poor little Miss Cowley! Jim felt certain her employer in the city was an unscrupulous blackguard. Mrs. Pooley, who meted out interest to her guests in strict proportion to the amount of rent they paid and food they consumed, regarded Miss Cowley with sentiments of mingled scorn and maternity.

"A thoroughly respectable young lady, mind you," she said. "And I wish I could say the same for all that lives in this street. I could tell you some things, Mr. Redlake, as 'ld make your 'air stand on end. Number thirty, for instance! I'm glad the police has its eye on it. With little children about too! But Miss Cowley, pore morsel, there's no vice in *'er*. Twelve shillin's, a week, she pays. It's a gift, you might say; but it makes an 'ole in the twenty-five she picks up, poor little shrimp! A nice, thoughtful girl; she'll wear 'er pore eyes out reading. But she pecks no more than a canarybird. No wonder she makes no blood! Now Miss Moger's another story . . ."

Very nearly a myth, Jim thought; till, one afternoon, the Major summoned him, as by royal command, to Miss Moger's presence. Miss Moger presented her compliments and, being an invalid, would Mr. Redlake do her the honour of taking tea? "It's her leg, you know," said the Major huskily. "It seems like a judgment, don't it, sir," he added, though why Jim could not imagine.

Mrs. Pooley was standing on guard at the door of the "first front" to watch him enter the presence. He could see her communicating the news of his approach by a series of violent nods to someone inside.

Within the room it was very dark—the windows of the first floor lost the October light before Jim's. Its air was thick with a reek of incense, twirling upward from a black cone that smouldered in a saucer on the table, behind which, on a spacious, but none too spacious *chaise longue* in the window itself, he saw the propped form of a fat, an enormous woman: a huge face, dew-lapped like a bull's with great hanging rolls of cheek, grotesquely plastered, except in the folds and the small, fish-like mouth, with dead-white rice-powder, and surmounted (on this occasion) by a luxuriant toupet of the colour called auburn.

"Good afternoon, dearie," she breathed in a heavy whisper. As she spoke she heaved herself upward with the flounder of a whale in its death-agony and a series of desperate grunts, then subsiding backwards, with the same movement letting a large book, which lay on what might have been lap, fall on to the floor. Jim picked it up carefully, prepared to hand it back to her, Miss Moger, meanwhile, exhibiting symptoms of the exhaustion her attempt at politeness had caused.

"It's my leg," she explained. "In your line you know what that means. Not that doctors can help me . . ." She rotated her great jowl sorrowfully. "No, keep it yourself, dearie"—once more Jim had offered her the fallen book—"I thought you might like to glance at it. Dreams . . . dead dreams!"

"The light's not very good," Jim suggested.

"Well, turn up the gas, dearie."

He did so. On the mantelpiece was an array of signed theatrical photographs from which, Jim surmised, his own Lottie Collins was merely an overflow.

"What page are you at?" Miss Moger enquired. "Twenty-four? Ah, that's Birmingham, Jack and the Beanstalk, in ninety-one. Am I right?" She quoted from memory: "*Miss Rosita Moger bewitched all eyes and all hearts* . . . It's all underlined in red ink. Ah, dear old Birmingham! You'll find a nice picture on the next page: *Miss Moger. Our New Kate Vaughan.*"

So, unerringly directed from page to page by Miss Moger's memory, Jim perused and read aloud, at command, a long series of ecstatic notices of Miss Moger's physical charms and artistic triumphs, extending from the early eighties to the middle nineties, from dour Aberdeen to emotional Plymouth, where a classically-minded reporter had called her *Taglioni Redivivus.* The task was a calvary of horror; he dared not turn from those cuts of a dazzling, lissom sprite in gauzy organdie to that white-plastered hulk on the *chaise longue* heaving its enormous bosom, revolving its monstrous head in rapt reminiscence.

"One more," she said, "only one more, dearie; I've kept it on purpose till last. Page six, eighty-seven—that's the Jubilee year—Covent Garden, in Robert the Devil. Have you got it? Rosita Moger in the 'Par de Fascination'? That's all. Now come over here and be comfy and have some tea. You can ring for Pooley."

He did so, and, strangely enough, when once that horror or luxury of reminiscence was over, he forgot the shattering contrasts that had made the experience so painful. When once she had established the light-footed brilliance of her past, this grotesque of a woman was actually entertaining. Her memory was as prodigious as her appetite, and while she engorged, with infectious relish, a pile of buttered muffins that would have kept poor little Miss Cowley alive for a week, her voice, thus lubricated, cleared, and she began to converse with a sprightliness that was not in the least sentimental.

Though Miss Moger, by her own account, lived in the past, her mind was acutely and even humorously aware of the present. It was a realistic, masterful mind—as might be judged from the subjection which she had imposed on Mrs. Pooley and the Major. Though some remnant of personal vanity impelled her to remind each new acquaintance of her former triumphs, she accepted her present lot—apart from the "bad leg"—with complete resignation. Paradoxically, her accumulation of flesh had freed her from the heaviest of the flesh's burdens.

"I don't care a button for men, dearie, now," she informed Jim. "I've done with all that, thank God! And between you and me and the doorpost it saves me a lot of trouble. The time I've wasted over them!"

It had not been entirely wasted, as Jim gathered later, when she frankly confessed that she owed her present comfortable independence to a "gentleman friend—a gentleman of title," as she put it, who had done his duty by her to the handsome extent of a pound a day for life. This anonymous paragon had moved in the highest circles; had been a close friend of King Edward, poor lamb, and Sir Ernest Cassel. "Rosita, you coarse little devil," he used to tell her, "you're as good as a tonic; you've got something that money can't buy; you've got Joy de Veeve!"

"And what's more," Miss Moger went on, "I've never lost it! That's the secret of happiness, dearie—just Joy de Veeve! I don't spoil my eyes reading rubbish like that poor little Cowley. Once a week I just run my eye over the *Era* to see who's passed away. But, bless your heart, this old window of mine's as good as a play. The things I see going on down there in the street! Take that Number Thirty!" At this point Miss Moger's humour became somewhat lubricious. "Well, poor things, that's the world all over, isn't it dearie? But folk are so serious these days they make you laugh. It's the same with the poor old stage, from what I can hear. These Russian Dancers they've all gone potty over—all these ladylike poses and high-class music and scenery that sends you buzzy. Male dancers, pooping off arrows all over the place! It's enough to look at their photographs to see what *they* are. Why, Gus Harris, at 'the Lane' knew more about ballet than any Russian. Male dancers? No fear! He knew what the public wanted. High-kicking, dearie! Why, give me a backcloth and a good rousing tune and finish up with the splits, and I'd bring the house down to-morrow! I can tell you what's wrong with these Russians: No Joy de Veeve!"

At the end of this interview, which included an appetizing debate with Mrs. Pooley on the subject of dinner, Miss Moger proved her complete emancipation from the irksome modesties of sex by offering to show Jim her leg. He declined this honour on the score of his limited medical experience.

"Well, any other day will do just as well," said Miss Moger cheerfully, as though she considered this privilege something for Jim to look forward to. "And if ever you feel a bit down in the dumps, why, all you need do is to walk right in. *I*'m not shy. I'll soon cheer you up!"

It was as a sequel to this visit that Jim received another, that evening, from Mrs. Pooley's only remaining lodger, Mr. Cortachy, who occupied the glacial, cistern-haunted top-floor of thirty-nine. Mr. Cortachy was a ghostly man in brown boots and a tightly-buttoned frock-coat—according to Mrs. Pooley a littery gentleman, who furtively haunted the reading-room of the British Museum all day and every day, except Sundays, when he went thrice to church, and during strange periods of relaxation say once in six weeks—when he locked himself up in his garret with a bottle of whisky. He wore tall india-rubber collars, a tartan tie and steel-rimmed spectacles, bound, at the bridge, with grey wool, which, when they were not in use, he slipped upward over his lined forehead and down on his lean red nose. His weak chin was inadequately concealed by a wisp of yellowish beard.

"I'm delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Redlake," he affirmed with a strong Scotch accent, "as a prospective member of one of the learned professions. This house is not eminent, as you may have observed, for culture or learning."

Jim asked him to sit down and offered a drink. Mr. Cortachy refused it firmly. "I never touch a drop when I'm engaged on my work," he said.

Jim asked what that work might be.

"Researrch," Mr. Cortachy answered. "To particularize," he went on, "it is genealogical researrch. Human vanity decrees, Mr. Redlake, that men who've gone up in the worrld—and more especially their wives—are obsessed with the idea of discovering an aristocratic ancestry to account for it. I meenister to that vanity. Not without success," he added, having based his conversational style on that of Thomas Carlyle. "In fact"—and he pushed up his spectacles to emphasize the statement—"I'm prepared to wager that within a week I could produce irrefrangible evidence of your own descent from the House of Plantagenet. Ay, and much good might it do you! But that's not the purpose of my visit here this evening. Far otherwise. Mr. Redlake, there's a wumman in this house!"

"Oh, more than one, surely?" Jim asked.

"A wumman," Mr. Cortachy repeated sternly. "A scarlet wumman! I'll not mention her name, for, maybe, that would be slanderous, but let me say this: I have reason to believe that you've visited her room this day."

"But, my dear Mr. Cortachy," Jim began.

"Ay, my dear Mr. Cortachy! Mr. Redlake, little do you know the risks you are running! *The Scarlet wumman, the whoore of*

Babylon! (Revelations, seventeen.) *Lust not after her beauty in thy heart*, Mr. Redlake; *neither let her take thee with her eyelids! Can a man take fire in his bosom*, Mr. Redlake, *and his clothes not be burned? Can one go upon hot coals and his feet not be burned?* (Proverbs, six: twenty-seven and twenty-eight.)" As he quoted his authorities Mr. Cortachy's voice sank to a monotone, in singular contrast to the passionate eloquence of his quotations. "Well, forewarned is forearmed," he concluded solemnly. "Mr. Redlake, I wish you good evening."

He went. Although Jim still felt that his neighbour had somewhat over-rated Miss Moger's powers of seduction, he was not uncurious (as Mr. Cortachy would have put it) of that lady's romantic history. That evening, when the Major, with a flourish, had placed the official cruet-stand on the table, he detained him with discreet enquiries as to the identity of Miss Moger's "friend."

"Well, I really don't think there's no secret about it, sir," said the Major, standing to attention. "As a matter of fact, in a manner of speaking, I'm connected with him myself, having served with his son in the regiment. It was the Earl of Essendine."

"Lord Essendine," Jim gasped. "Why, I know him . . ."

"No, I beg your pardon, sir. I'm sure you're mistaken there. Not his present Lordship, that's Lord Folville, my company commander. It's his father I'm speaking of. And a rare old rip he was, if you'll excuse me saying so!"

It was extraordinary, Jim thought, as he ate his dinner that evening, how, wherever he went, the Essendine name pursued him, insinuating itself into the woof of his life: first his mother's vague references, then Thorpe, then Julian at Winchester, and now, here in Lupus Street, the passionate past of Miss Moger. He felt, superstitiously, that fate surely must have a hand in this constant recurrence—a malicious, ironical fate that played with his heart as a cat with a fluttering bird. For although his first thought in the morning, before ever he went to the hospital, was to glance down the social column of the *Morning Post*, no announcement of Lady Essendine's return had yet appeared in it. The mansion in Grosvenor Square, toward which he would find himself drifting whenever he walked out for exercise, looked as emptily desolate as ever. A whole month had passed without any reply to his letters. His independence began to rebel against Cynthia's careless disloyalty. After all, he was young and healthy, with a normal interest in women—not in Scarlet Miss Moger, indeed, nor the poor little Cowley girl, nor those escorted ladies Miss Moger watched with such cynical interest as they took out their business-like latchkeys on the door-step of Number Thirty. Yet daily, among the fluttering bevies that the Oxford Street shops disgorged at closing-time, there were eyes, sufficiently charming, that would glance a little wistfully, even hopefully in Jim's direction. At St. Luke's, in the casualty-department, was a pretty probationer, with hair the same colour as Cynthia's and a voice much softer, who seemed not disinclined . . . But no. Not a bit of it. He was still quite hopelessly in love, and far more like Hamlet now than Cynthia had ever seen him.

In vain search for forgetfulness he threw all his energies into the routine of hospital work. Though he didn't like it, he found more satisfaction in this than in writing verses that nobody would read, to say nothing of a sense of virtue, till one evening, returning late and fagged-out to his rooms, he found Cynthia's letter. The fact that it was addressed to Lupus Street told him she had received the ones he had written since coming to London. It had been posted only a few hours before, for the gum on the envelope was scarcely dry. He read greedily:

Jim darling,

We came back last night after an adorable time in Paris. Such marvellous frocks! We quite lost our heads at Doucet's. They were adamant; I'm hobbled completely! How sweet of you to write all those lovely letters. I simply adored them. But wherever in the world is Lupus Street? Isn't it a disease? Mother desires me to beg you—you see how formal we are!—to come here to luncheon on Thursday. Quite a tiny party, so perhaps . . .

In frightful haste,
Cynthia.

Fool! I meant to say it's at one-fifteen. C. F.

Wherever was Lupus Street? Jim laughed. He could tell her; surely in Paradise!

II. *One Man of Letters*

OF COURSE Jim reached Essendine House much too early, in spite of the fact that, all along Oxford Street, he had purposely checked his speed, dawdling in front of shop windows to inspect, not their contents, but the elegant image of himself in the top hat and cutaway morning coat which he had recklessly bought for the occasion on his tailor's advice. As he entered Grosvenor Square he glanced nervously at his watch and found he had ten minutes to spare before he could decently present himself. He decided to kill time by walking, as though for pleasure, round and round the square —a proceeding by which he attracted the attention of the identical constable whose advice to move on he had taken some weeks before.

"Now, perhaps, he'll believe I was speaking the truth," Jim thought as he passed him for the fourth time, and finally approached the steps of Essendine House at ten minutes past one precisely. He put out his hand to press the bell, but before he could reach it the door was flung open by one of the footmen, who, apparently, had been watching him all the time through one of the narrow windows that flanked the portico.

"Good morning, Alfred." Jim cheerfully addressed him by name; but the footman, with whom he had often spoken at Thorpe, appeared to regard this familiarity as a breach of good manners. "We are not in the country now," his eyes seemed to say as he took Jim's coat and hat under the butler's supervision. "Kindly remember that this is London. We do things differently here."

The butler opened a door on the right and showed Jim in ceremoniously.

"Her ladyship will be down in a moment," he said, in a hushed voice, and left him alone. In spite of all Jim's precautions it seemed he was the first arrival. Well, perhaps that would give him time to adjust himself to his new surroundings. Were they really so new, after all? There was something familiar about them. It was, Jim decided, that characteristic faint fragrance which he associated with

Thorpe Castle—that aura of baronial stone and pot-pourri and beeswax which the Essendines, apparently, carried about with them like an animal odour wherever they dwelt.

Yet the room itself was as unlike any room at Thorpe as it well could be. Whereas the rooms at Thorpe, however vast and uncomfortable, always gave an impression of complete and distinct personality, this room was as impersonal as a (first class) waiting-room. Anticipating a later fashion—or perhaps perpetuating an earlier one—its principal furnishings were screens and cabinets and tables of Chinese red lacquer. In the midmost of three tall windows, on a tortured pedestal, stood a magnificent vase of red Lang-Yao *sang-de-bœuf*; the mantelpiece was crowded with museum-pieces of the same period, the spoils of some Oriental mission in the eighteenth century in which an acquisitive Folville had been engaged. Above their rich glazes, flambé and pigeon's-blood and coral-red, a ferocious, symbolical *Sung* painting of a tiger kept watch with a smoulder of golden eyes. Yet, in spite of these numbers of individual perfections, as precious as those which embellished the Hintons' house in Berkeley Square, this room, as a whole, lacked any æsthetic direction; for the tiger of Chao-Tan-Lin bared its fangs and glared, quite naturally, at a solid Winterhalter portrait of George Essendine's grandfather; the golden curtains that flanked the *sang-de-bœuf* vase came not fom Pekin but from Long Acre, and the shoddy Parisian rubbish with which other tables were littered gave the disturbing effect of a hasty collaboration between the *Magazins du Louvre* and the Louvre museum.

Jim stood there so long without anything happening that he almost began to wonder if he had mistaken the day for which he had been invited, till, suddenly, outside, he heard a sound that fluttered his heart. Cynthia's voice. Was it hers indeed? How many times, hearing the clear, penetrating tones of Lady Essendine's, had he not been deceived? Sold again! Jim thought, as the door opened and a woman's figure appeared. Yet, just as at Thorpe on the day of the garden-party he had mistaken Lady Essendine for Cynthia, so now, unpardonably, he mistook Cynthia for her mother—unpardonably, but not without reason; for this London Cynthia was entirely different from the Cynthia of Thorpe Folville, from that image of a long-legged impulsive girl with rebellious hair who lounged in the sun or ran like the wind in her careless, simple tennis-frocks, that Cynthia, so soft and childlike, who had shared his kisses in the summer dusk. There was a difference not of two months but of years between that cherished vision and this hard, polished, fashionable young woman, so correct and constricted in her Doucet *tailleur* with sable at her throat and an enormous black hat with a hussar fringe.

"So nice of you to come, Jim," she said, with that falling inflection which he knew so well in her mother's voice. "What an age since we met! How smart you are in your *grande tenue!*"

Her eyes could still dazzle him with their wide blueness, yet even they seemed different, for the eyelids were faintly shadowed, the brows lightly pencilled; the rosy bloom of her cheeks, the crimson of her lips, not entirely their own.

"My darling!" The words almost choked him. "If you knew how hungrily I've been waiting for this moment!"

He reached out his arms to take her. Instinctively she withdrew herself from his ardour.

"Jim! What *are* you doing?" she protested. "For heaven's sake be careful of my hat!"

"Oh, damn your hat, Cynthia!" he cried. "Can't you see that I'm dying to kiss you?"

She laughed softly, exquisitely, as she yielded. "Mad creature!" she said. "We're in London, my dear child. This isn't Thorpe Folville."

"What difference does it make?"

"The difference that I shall have to go straight upstairs and tidy myself," she laughed. "You've come terribly early."

"I hoped I should have the chance of seeing you, properly, for a moment."

"Well, you have seen me 'properly,' haven't you?" she mocked as she disappeared.

In the course of the next hour Jim was to realize the difference between Thorpe Folville and London. Before Cynthia returned the room was crowded with arriving guests whose august names the butler announced as he showed them in. The first was the beautiful Lady Elizabeth Purefoy, whose charms had been mentioned so often in the columns of social gossip which he had lately perused in his vain search for news of Cynthia.

With regard to Lady Elizabeth's beauty the journalists were evidently out of date. The adjective which had attached itself to her name some fifteen years before had stuck to it like a Homeric epithet long after the quality to which it referred had faded. In the shock of his first sight of her all that Jim could see was a leopard-skin coat surmounted by a hungry smile which, together, reminded him instantly of the Chinese tiger above the mantelpiece. The smile, it appeared, was intended for himself as a representative of the male sex, for Lady Elizabeth's famous eyes were so dilated with belladonna that she could not possibly be certain who he was. Supposing, however, that anyone whom she met at the Essendines' must be an acquaintance, she advanced upon him with a carnivorous relish and held out her clawed hand.

"What a relief!" she sighed. "I thought I was late, and Janet is so particular. How are you? So long since we met!" Then, realizing, perhaps, from Jim's nervous response that she never had met him at all, and hearing, in the butler's next announcement a familiar name, she pounced, like a beast of prey, on the new arrival, Lord Clun.

From that moment the remaining eleven guests of Lady Essendine's tiny party arrived in a constant stream, against which the hostess, who had apparently dropped into it from heaven, struggled like a channel-swimmer in an adverse tide. By this time the clatter of voices was so loud and animated that the butler's announcements were nearly inaudible—not that that made much difference, for not one of them knew Jim, nor took the least notice of him, standing like a timid swimmer on the edge of a whirlpool. It was shabby of Cynthia, he thought, to have left him so stranded among all these strangers; then his heart gave a sudden leap as he saw, advancing, with Lord Essendine's hand on his arm, the tall, distinguished figure of his father, George Redlake!

The sight of him filled Jim with pride and a welcome reassurance of his own right to be there at all, which till then had seemed questionable. Not that George Redlake recognized him; he was far too busy, escaping from Lord Essendine's friendly arm to bow over his hostess's hand, then moving about, with a discreet, rather solemn remoteness, from lady to lady, including the carnivorous Purefoy.

Nobody in the room that day seemed more self-possessed than George Redlake; he knew everyone, and for each had an appropriate, finely-turned phrase. "If I could ever be like him," Jim thought, "how marvellous it would be!"

He was thrilled, at the same moment, to see that Lady Essendine had finally recognized him and signified the fact with a welcoming nod and a smile that almost translated itself into the words: "So nice of you to come!" But no sooner had the familiar expression appeared on her face than it vanished: above that impolite hubbub of polite speech the butler's dull voice was proclaiming: "Her Royal Highness, Princess . . ."

The last syllables were lost to Jim; but Lady Essendine's response was electric. Abandoning all else she stepped forward; then, suddenly, as though she had stumbled, dipped down in a rapid curtsey before a female figure in dove-grey whose outline (unlike her conduct, presumably), resembled that of one of Noah's daughters in a nursery ark.

"I'm afraid I'm late," said the Princess shyly.

"Oh no, ma'am, not in the least!" Lady Essendine's clear voice protested. "It's just half past."

"Then your clocks are all wrong," said the Princess determinedly. "Ah, here's Lord Essendine."

From that moment the air of the room became thick with "ma'ams" and curtseys, amid which Jim felt himself swept onward, as in an eddy, through the folding doors, which the butler had thrown open, and into the dining-room. Instead of sitting, as he had hoped, beside Cynthia, he found himself wedged between old Lady Clun and the "beautiful" Lady Elizabeth. Lady Clun, having realized at one glance that he didn't matter, fell upon a plate of olives with a zest that was worthy of Miss Moger. Lady Elizabeth, emulating the python which fascinates before it devours, turned on him the luscious gaze of her dilated pupils.

"I'm quite ashamed of myself," she confided; "but please don't be angry with me. My memory's simply frightful in these days. I know you so well. *Do* tell me: Who *are* you?"

Jim told her.

"Of course! How stupid of me! Those delicious books. I *adore* them. But, surely . . .?" The big pupils expressed bewilderment.

Jim answered the unspoken question: "It's my father who writes them, you know. He's sitting just opposite to us, next to Lady Cynthia."

"*Enfin! J'y suis.* I'm as blind as a bat. Your father, you say? Darling Cynthia! Don't you think she's *too lovely*? Quite divine! And *so* like Janet. You lucky, lucky young men. My own vintage wasn't so bad, but nineteen-ten! The girls of this season are quite ravishing. Don't you think so?"

The question quite clearly demanded a gallant protest; yet that phrase, so familiar on Cynthia's lips, on those others sent a chill to Jim's heart. In nearly every word that he had heard spoken that morning he recognized that language of Mayfair with which he had been surfeited at Thorpe. Round this table, as in the outer room, he heard the same names referred to, the same subjects discussed. All talk was of the same metal, almost of the same day's minting; all life was a mirror on whose surface there flickered reflections of the contemporary comedy: its humours, its scandals, its latest chicaneries political and social, its newest impudences in fashionable letters or art. Reflections. . . . For as soon as he, the outsider, probed their reality, he encountered a glassy, impenetrable surface and could go no further. On this tenuous plane no human intimacy could be possible. So Cynthia had implied that morning. "We're in London now. This isn't Thorpe Folville," she had said.

He refused to accept those words at their thin face-value. These people were neither so trivial nor so simple as their manner suggested. The bearded man on Lady Essendine's right was a famous diplomat whose subtleties were acknowledged in every chancery in Europe; on her left with his broad, hunched shoulders and jutting nose, with a wavering smile on his lips, sat a great political idealist; even Lord Essendine—at that moment adapting himself to his royal guest—had been chosen to rule over millions; while Lord Clun, were he nothing else—and he was much besides—was known as a great connoisseur and a lover of all the arts. Yet all that company, as Jim now listened to them, seemed to have no ambition, no interest, beyond the empty exchange of these bright, new-minted symbols of speech, to be joined in the playing of a kind of infantile round-game in which people of all ages and degrees of dignity must be recognized by private diminutives, initials or nicknames.

Was it really worth learning? George Redlake, apparently, thought so. He knew all those Christian names, all those glittering symbols. He sat there, superbly at ease, his handsome face flushed with wine, keeping Cynthia and the woman on his left—a dark, waxen figure whose lovely throat might have been chosen to display the pearls that embraced it—in a state of continual entertainment. From their faces Jim judged that his father was being imprudent, perhaps outrageous. He watched them all jealously. Since that hurried, reluctant kiss, Cynthia hadn't even looked at him once.

By this time the beauty on his right, disdaining so dull a prey, had given him up. There was a moment of silence in which Lady Clun, whom the excellent luncheon had hitherto rendered incapable of speech, launched a sudden, sepulchral announcement out of the blue:

"Juliet Errol has had her appendix out. Last week. In Madrid."

"What . . . *again*?" came Lady Essendine's loud, clear voice from the end of the table.

In the laugh that followed Jim saw his father moisten his lips.

"That's only the second. I'm sure she has nine," he said.

It was timed to perfection.

"Mr. Redlake, I'm ashamed of you!"

Lady Essendine pretended to be shocked; but the smile which she gave George Redlake betrayed her gratitude. She glanced at her husband mischievously, hoping he had heard this impudent *mot* at his lady's expense. If he had, Lord Essendine disguised his feelings completely. But the Princess, who hated to miss anything, pricked up her ears.

"Who's had her appendix out?" she demanded eagerly. "Who did you say?"

"Juliet Errol, ma'am," Lady Clun replied with intense satisfaction. "Last week. In Madrid."

"Juliet Errol. Who's she?"

"Her husband is counselor at Madrid, ma'am," said Lord Essendine smoothly. "A charming woman," he maintained, as he momentarily met his wife's eye.

"Then why don't *I* know her?" the princess asked pathetically.

Lord Essendine's explanation, though doubtless a triumph of tact, was lost to him. At that moment, still smiling over the success of his little joke, George Redlake had suddenly become aware of his son's presence. At this unexpected sight his red face went redder, his eyes goggled with an astonishment even more intense than that which he had shown at their last meeting. He stared at Jim as though he were not only surprised but affronted at the insolence he had shown by invading an enclosure so particularly his own. Acknowledging Jim's nervous smile with a brusque inclination of his head he abruptly disowned him, loudly engaging Cynthia in some new and ardent subject of conversation as though he were anxious to pass over such a discreditable connection.

"Now he's just showing off," Jim thought bitterly, for the deliberate slight had hurt him. "I wonder what he'd think if I told him I'd kissed her this morning. That'd make him sit up!" he thought; but, at that instant, his bitterness faded; Cynthia looked up and smiled at him. At last! As she turned to his father, Jim knew that she was speaking of him; quite kindly, he guessed, for, as she spoke, George Redlake's astonished eyes surveyed him with new interest, almost with respect, as though, after all, this discreditable relationship might have its uses. "A great friend of mine. Didn't you know?" He caught Cynthia's words.

Indeed, George Redlake must have been more impressed than he imagined; for later, when Royalty had risen and the guests drifted back, well-pleased with the world, to the lacquer room, he took the initiative by approaching Jim of his own accord.

"So we meet again!" he said with an engaging smile. "I didn't know you were friendly with these people. It's quite a surprise to me. In fact, for the moment I hardly recognized you. What are you doing here?"

Jim smiled. "Here?"

"In London, I mean. You're not staying in the house?" The question was almost anxious. "I had a vague idea you were still at Winchester."

Jim told him he was studying medicine at St. Luke's. George Redlake's face fell. "It's my grandfather's idea," Jim explained. "I'm not really keen on it. What I want to do really," he confided, with an enthusiasm which owed a good deal to the wine he had drunk, "what I want to do really, of course, is to write like you."

"To write? My dear boy!" George Redlake shook his head sadly. "It seems to me all the world is wanting to write in these days. All these clever young people. This deluge of competent books. How can anyone expect to get a hearing in this gorged market? Ten years ago things were quite different. To-day it's quite out of the question."

"But new authors *do* make successes," Jim mildly suggested. "After all, they must."

"So they tell me," said George Redlake dubiously. "And yet, who are they?"

Jim mentioned two names, haphazard.

"I thought we were speaking of literature." His tone was contemptuous.

"I am," said Jim. "I've been hoping," he added, "that your advice and your influence might help me—to say nothing of the name."

"The name?" George Redlake's face gave a sudden jump and went very red. "If you publish anything I should strongly advise you to invent another. The possible confusion might be embarrassing for both of us. As to advice—I'm giving it now; and as for influence . . ." He smiled sadly. "My influence, I'm afraid, is a broken reed, Jim. I am not of this time; I belong to no school or *coterie*; I carry no weight. Don't think I complain for one moment. I'm perfectly content to plough my lonely furrow in the knowledge that a tiny, intelligent minority are really interested. Don't imagine that *these* people care in the least about literature. Still, if I can help you. . . . By the way, what have you been writing?"

"A good deal of poetry," Jim told him.

"Ah, *poetry*," George Redlake echoed with obvious relief to know that it wasn't a novel. "Don't think I'm discouraging you," he went on with an added cheerfulness. "Bring your verses along to my rooms. No time like the present. What's wrong with this afternoon? Four-thirty, at 90 Clarges Street? Of course you know the address? And now, my dear boy, I suppose I must speak to this princess," he said with affected distaste—for, all through this conversation he had been waiting uneasily for the opening which he now perceived and clutched at with a haste that, to Jim, seemed almost indecent.

Indeed, in spite of his urgency, the dove-grey daughter of Noah very nearly escaped him. She went, accompanied to the door by Lord Essendine. In the confusion of fluttered good-byes Jim sought for Cynthia.

"Well, Jim, are you frightfully bored? You look it," she told him lazily.

"I've been longing to speak to you."

"Well, here I am." She laughed. "Do you know Jim Redlake, Anne?" The dark girl with the pearls disclosed a ravishing smile. "He's a great friend of Julian's . . . yes, Julian Hinton. Just a bit like his father—don't you think so?"

"Oh, his father's divine!" said the dark girl meltingly. "Poor Juliet's nine appendixes!"

"I had something I wanted to say to you," Jim put in awkwardly.

"Well, say it, Jim darling."

Her wide blue eyes gazed straight into his with faint amusement.

Jim writhed. She was simply playing with him. He wouldn't stand it. He turned to her companion. "Will you excuse me?" he said taking Cynthia's arm and firmly but gently detaching her. Cynthia laughed:

"You'd imagine," she said, "he was going to propose to me."

"It's been hell," he told her as soon as they were out of earshot. "After all this time—and barely a glimpse of you. Cynthia . . . when am I going to see you again?"

"Oh, someday soon. What makes you so frightfully impatient?"

"Impatient? I love you."

"Hush, my dear child. I know. But don't say it so loud."

"What about to-morrow?"

"To-morrow?" she repeated vaguely. "I haven't my diary. Do let me ring you up, Jim dear."

"I'm not on the telephone."

"What a bore! Why aren't you? That's the Postmaster General over there. We'll ask him."

"Well, even if I were, I don't believe you'd ring me."

"Oh, Jim, don't be rude now." She pursed her lips adorably. "I'll write to you. What's your address?"

"You'll find it in all my letters," he answered bitterly.

"Your letters? Oh yes. How silly of me! Jim, darling, I really must fly. The car's ordered for Anne and me at three, and it's past that already."

"You *will* write, Cynthia?" he entreated.

"Oh, Jim, don't be *too* ridiculous! Come along, Anne darling!"

He found himself saying good-bye to Lady Essendine, and almost the last.

"*So* glad you were able to come. Do you think Cynthia's looking well? So high-spirited, party after party, dancing all night. I don't know how she does it. George dear, did you see Jim Redlake?"

And Lord Essendine, true to his canons of hospitality, escorted him into the hall as politely as, five minutes before, he had followed Her Royal Highness, though somehow, if he had been less polite, Jim would have felt more complimented, since this courtesy, he guessed, was reserved for royalties and inferiors, being quite unnecessary with equals.

At the door the car, with Mr. Dewpoint, still patiently waited for Cynthia and her cousin. It seemed that her hurry had not been so pressing as she had led him to imagine. Mr. Dewpoint, Miss Minnet's Edith forgotten, sat reading his *Petit Rire*. Even he looked frozen and formal in this London air. Jim glanced at his watch. Nearly half-past three! Already he had missed his afternoon lecture. Unless he hurried he wouldn't have time to collect those precious manuscripts which he wanted to show his father at tea in Clarges Street. He was glad to hurry in any case, for the air was shrewd, taking part in the blackness and density of clouds that, massed in the north-east, presaged snow, and in spite of his tailor's persuasions, his means had stopped short of an overcoat to match his new morning suit. The black chill penetrated his bones; he felt as naked as those leprous plane-trees sloughing their sooty integument. The black chill was in his soul; for, even now, it seemed that Cynthia had evaded him; he felt that he hadn't really tied her down.

In Oxford Street, paper-boys, fluttering red-lettered news-sheets, were shouting: *Dissolution of Parliament*. That meant, he supposed, the end of the House of Lords—the end of that order of life against which, at that moment, he felt so rebellious. Lord Essendine, of course, must have known that this news was coming; yet, during the luncheon-party, not one word had been spoken of politics. These people on the brink of the abyss behaved as confidently as though they were still living in the eighteenth century. Did their attitude signify pride or scorn or merely the fatalistic supineness of some huge failure in evolution—aurochs or mammoth? Or were they indeed a failure? It was hardly fair to say that. On the contrary, men like Lord Essendine were perfectly adapted by heredity and training for the kind of job to which it had pleased God to call them. Their only misfortune was that the job no longer existed—and whose fault was that?

At thirty-nine Lupus Street all was confusion; Mrs. Pooley and the Major were engaged in decamping from the ground-floor front, while the huge white face of Miss Moger peered down from her window with an eager interest in their activities.

"A new tenant at last, Mr. Redlake," Mrs. Pooley said breathlessly. "Coming in to-night. Now, Major, don't stand there gaping. You've seen Mr. R. before. Buck up! Get a move on!"

Jim reached Clarges Street with his manuscripts on the nick of time. A withered valet in a black suit admitted him and showed him upstairs to a low, dim room overlooking the street. This setting was perfectly appropriate to the position in the world of letters which George Redlake had so carefully defined: it was the room, one could see at a glance, of one who, however liberal and even encouraging towards the extravagances of modern youth, was content, even proud to remain a standard-bearer in the lost cause of Art for Art's sake, paying tribute, in passing, to the solidity of the past. Hence the madder-red Morris curtains, the faded garlands of the Aubusson carpet, the heavy mahogany book-shelves and chairs, not unlike Miss Pooley's, in whose luminous patina the brass-fendered, comfortable fire enkindled a roseate glow. Hence also, set like an altar in the bow of the window, the massive Victorian writing-table, with its silver inkstand, pen-tray and Georgian candlesticks, its blank sheets of superfine paper whose virgin whiteness invited the inevitable word. No slovenly prose, one felt instinctively, no slipshod vulgarity could survive the mute reproach of these fine, austere surroundings. Yet an artist, they seemed to say, need not be entirely unworldly—as witness these invitation-cards, carelessly displayed, to the very best houses; nor a prude—as witness these drawings by Rops and Beardsley; nor illiberal—as witness (with smiling apologies) these cubes of Picasso's; nor ascetic—as witness this dressing-gown of Florentine brocade, this cabinet of Corona Coronas, this dingy bottle of '48 Courvoisier.

"Mr. Redlake is resting, sir," the valet murmured discreetly. "I'll tell him you've arrived. Will you kindly take a chair?" And, to show what a perfect machine he was, he silently disturbed the embers, and put into Jim's hands a copy of the *Morning Post*.

George Redlake, appearing a few moments later, seemed somewhat ill-tempered and decidedly the worse for wear. In his sleep the stimulating effects of the Essendine's lunch had worn off. His face was pallid and bony, the skin shrunken and inelastic; his fine hands, protruding from the cuffs of a black-velvet smoking-jacket, looked brittle and bloodlessly white.

"Ah, here you are, Jim," he said, without any pretence of pleasure. He looked at his watch, as though anxious to assure himself that Jim had arrived too early.

"I've brought you those poems," Jim told him eagerly. "Here they are."

"Ah, yes. I remember. Do you smoke?" The tone was almost hostile. "Cigarettes over there." He himself selected with care a long Corona and lit it with a coal from the fire. Then he shivered and hunched his shoulders. In that low-ceilinged room, stalking hungrily, with his black glossy coat and his grim, strong-featured face, George Redlake, at that moment resembled some dark-winged predatory bird. A raven, Jim thought—remembering a story he had read: of how, when their offspring were fledged, the parent birds would drive them away from the clefts in which they had been hatched, soaring angrily over them, blackly impending, then falling on them like gannets with all their fierce weight and dashing them downward to death in the waves beneath.

Some such cruelty he seemed to see now in George Redlake's eyes, as, thrusting aside all Jim's small hopes and aspirations, he launched himself into a paroxysm of protest, complaint and self-justification.

"You talk of being a writer as if you thought it were fun. I can tell you it's about as much fun as running from a pack of wolves. Is there anyone living who's followed his Art with a devotion more single-minded than mine? Have I spared myself? Haven't I poured out every atom of beauty that ever was in me? Lavishly! Book after book! Look at them . . . look at them! Have I ever made the smallest concession to popular taste? Have I ever bowed to a mood or followed a fashion? Yet what do I get for it? Do you imagine for one moment that any of this is recognized? Do you think there's a critic living who cares a brass farthing for style, or knows the difference between fine prose and journalese? If they do, do you think they'll dare recognize it when they see it? Not they! As long as you're unknown they may condescend to flatter you; but as soon as your reputation dwarfs theirs, why then, God help you!—they'll be out for your blood. Wolves, I say, and every self-confident cub that comes down from Oxford to scribble in some damn little precious, perishing weekly, will yelp with the rest at the work you've spent a lifetime in imagining and sweated lifeblood to write. Here's an artist acknowledged by the public, they say, let's heave a brick at him! Knock him down! So they call you a 'pretty writer,' a 'painter of elegant landscape' and gape on all fours at some cub like themselves who has dared, as they call it, to put the talk of a pothouse and the scribbles of a latrine into print. If it weren't for America," he cried, "I would never write another word!"

"But surely," Jim suggested, "those things don't matter in the long run."

"Posterity? Immortality?" George Redlake smiled wryly. "When you're sixty, as I am, with a lifework behind you, you'll take those for what they are worth, not for what they sound like."

Jim's flattering suggestion, however, for what it was worth, succeeded in calming his paroxysm which, in fact, arose from a sheaf of newspaper criticisms of his latest book that had come from the press-clipping agency to which—although he declared that he never read them—George Redlake subscribed. They had arrived at an unfortunate moment when the incense of the Essendine party was still in his head and the effects of the Essendine lunch on his liver. In spite of his recent successes George Redlake still suffered from the non-recognition complex that had devastated Jim's mother's married life. One veiled sneer in a halfpenny paper could immerse him in depths from which not even a column of praise in *The Times* or the *Athenæum* could rescue him. However loudly he boasted of his literary integrity, he was a lonely, nervous man, a quivering mass of self-consciousness, to whom flattery, however unintelligent, was the breath of life. At the moment the waves had closed above his head.

Literature was a painful subject. He preferred to forget it. Jim's manuscripts? He might just as well fold them up.

"Have you heard of your mother recently?" his father asked abruptly.

"Not for seven or eight months."

"Is she still at that place in Wimpole Street?"

"I really can't say. She doesn't live there, you know."

"She doesn't live there?" George Redlake repeated sharply. "Oh . . ." He paused. "Do you happen to have met a friend of hers, Dr. Fosdyke?"

"Yes, once. When I saw her last. We went out to dinner with him."

"What kind of man was he?"

"I don't know," Jim began.

"You mean that you didn't like him?"

"No. I didn't," he confessed.

"Why?" The question was urgent, but quite unanswerable; the memory of that curious evening, though fading, still troubled his mind—not so much with the horror he had once felt as with shame for the fact that he had felt it. In those days he had looked on his father in a heroic light. Since this morning, and much more during the last half hour, its brilliance had been dimmed. George Redlake's ungenerous nature, his callous egotism, repelled him. What was more, as soon as this narrow questioning on the subject of Jim's mother began, George Redlake's normally handsome face had assumed a positively ugly look, like that of a vicious horse which bares its teeth, glancing sideways. Providentially Jim was saved from answering the last and most embarrassing of these questions by the appearance of the valet, who announced: "A lady to see you, sir." Jim rose at once; he was only too thankful to escape; but his father detained him.

"No, don't go!" he commanded. "A friend. I'd like her to meet you."

She entered. "Oh, George, what a cute little apartment!" she cried.

As George Redlake, his face transformed, bent over her hand and ceremoniously kissed it, Jim realized why America had been excepted from his diatribes; he also realized why he had been invited to tea that afternoon. In a material sense it was decidedly a hand worth kissing, being loaded with coruscations of diamonds and step-cut emeralds.

"Louisa," George Redlake said, "I want you to meet my son. Jim, this is my friend Mrs. Parrot."

Though this was how it was spelt, he pronounced the name "Parrow," to rhyme with that of a smaller bird.

"Why, this certainly is a surprise!" said the latest Egeria. "I can scarcely believe it, George. He's nearly as tall as you. To think of your having a great, fine boy like this!"

"Yes, he gives my age away, doesn't he?" said George Redlake smiling. "Let me take your coat." He removed the luxurious sable. "Sit down and get yourself warm. And then you shall give us some tea." And he hovered and danced about her, no longer a predatory raven but an amorous woodcock.

Mrs. Parrot obeyed him. She sat down, modestly though coquettishly warming her elegant black-silk ankles in front of the fire. She was, as Jim later learned, a widow, the relict of that well-known Pennsylvanian senator Sheldon Wadsworth Parrot who had married her late in life, and after five months of ideal companionship, bequeathed her his Huguenot name and a few odd millions. It was that name rather than the dollars which counted with Mrs. Parrot. Although the senator (as she always called him) had died ten years before, of old age and Christian Science, she constantly spoke of him, and, being a Spiritualist, believed that her life was still subject to his wise direction.

Indeed, as she told Jim that afternoon, it was through the senator that, during the last six months, she had made George Redlake's acquaintance. George Redlake was his favourite author. At the moment when he had his last stroke Sheldon Wadsworth Parrot had actually been reading one of George's books. For year after year the messages which he sent from "the other side" had been scattered with cryptic allusions to George's work, which had culminated, seven months ago, in a precise command. *Go and see that man!* the table had rapped out sternly. *Go and see that man!* the medium's pencil had repeated.

"So I came . . . and here I am!" said Mrs. Parrot demurely. "It certainly seemed like Fate! Isn't life mysterious?"

Jim agreed that it certainly was. But he liked Mrs. Parrot. There was something extraordinarily naïve and honest about her light blue eyes. Her voice was quiet, its characteristic inflexions engaging. In spite of age—she must have seen the last of forty—her face and her figure had that air of unchanging youth which proceeds from the natural (or financial) dower of middle-aged American womanhood. In the firelight, indeed, her features, though rather too smoothly massaged, had the wistful piquancy of the type which had been standardized, a few years before, by Charles Dana Gibson. Her presence, as her jewelled hands poured out China tea, whose smoky fragrance mingled with that of her clothes' costly perfume, was sedately soothing. Her composure, though so different in its origins, resembled Lady Essendine's. It suggested, like hers, a complete immunity from any material care—not, as in Lady Essendine's case, arising from a confidence bred through centuries, but from the protection of incredible wealth that cushioned her life in velvet like a rich jewel enclosed in an expensive casket.

"Oh, George," she said, "how perfectly charming of you! To think of your having gotten me cinnamon toast! Fancy cinnamon toast in London! It takes me right back to dear old Bryn Mawr," she said wistfully.

Yes, her voice was like honey; her attitude girlish, virginal. Jim only wished that she wouldn't, before she spoke, open her mouth quite so wide, disclosing so much pink tongue, such a lot of white teeth. This intimate display of clean mucous membrane was almost embarrassing in its frankness. Yet what, he thought, could be more modest than her behaviour toward his father? If Mrs. Parrot carried her pass-book on her fingers, she certainly wore her sentiment on her sleeve. It was clear that she regarded George Redlake precisely in the light that he would have desired: as a great, unpretentious apostle of "advanced" culture, as a man whose commanding intellect and exquisite art, enhanced by the senator's ghostly approval, were not debased, as was so often the case, by any low-class Bohemianism; as a perfect, a more than Southern gentleman.

"Go and see that man!" the inspired planchette had commanded. What a man! Her calm blue eyes rested on him with possessive pride. What an ornament to any society, even the most exclusive!

(Only look at those invitation-cards on the mantelpiece.) What taste, what refinement! (But could those drawings of Beardsley be quite quite proper?) The monitory shade of the senator bade her lower her eyes. She was safer, much safer, she decided, on literary ground. Was this really the table, she asked, on which all those great works had been written? And this pen? Really this one? Of course a fountain-pen would have quite destroyed the illusion. An original, holograph manuscript? In the waste-paper basket? What a crime! She turned to Jim, shyly: "I hardly dare tell your father how much his dear books have meant to me and the senator."

George Redlake, thus, indirectly addressed, puffed his woodcock feathers. All the bitterness engendered by those press-cuttings, that imprudent lunch, immediately vanished. He was changed, even physically; he grew young, buoyant, boyish, affecting a humility that was really boastful. His whole person benevolently expanded in the warm bath of Mrs. Parrot's wonder and enthusiasm, in the shy adoration of her eyes, in the consoling rays of luxury and wealth that emanated from her sable coat and her sparkling jewels.

"But I mustn't keep you from your work," she murmured reluctantly. "I suppose I must go."

"And remove all my inspiration?" George Redlake asked.

"How I wish that were true," she said fervently, shaking her head. "Are you going, too?" She turned kindly to Jim, who was picking up his hat. "Then of course I can give you a lift in my little automobile. I'm just round the corner at Claridge's, and the man can take you home."

George Redlake, bareheaded, accompanied them to the door. He was flushed and extremely handsome, Jim thought, as he waved them farewell. The little automobile, a Rolls Royce Silver Ghost, carried them smoothly out of Clarges Street and round the corner through Mayfair. In the well-lit portico of Claridge's, as he handed Mrs. Parrot out of her car, Jim was surprised to see that her face, so soft in the firelight of his father's room, had a curious hardness. There was determination in those lips, in that Dana Gibson chin. And her wide blue eyes were—how should he put it?—hungry.

"Good-bye, Jim," she said, "I may call you Jim, mayn't I? Are you sure you won't take the car? Well, this certainly has been a marvellous afternoon. I shall tell the senator this evening. And I think—" She could hardly speak for the emotion that filled her—"I think that your father's the loveliest man I've ever known."

As he walked back to Lupus Street, sheer habit diverting him through Grosvenor Square, Jim decided that, after all, he liked Mrs. Parrot and was sorry for her. He also discovered, for the first time in his life, that he hated his father.

III. *Another Man of Letters*

IN THIS sudden revulsion of feeling it seemed to Jim that his attitude toward his mother had been unjust and childish. The horror of those sleepless hours which he had spent on the sofa in the scent of Doctor Fosdyke's white lilac had no more validity than the memory of a nightmare. "Why do I feel so differently now?" he asked himself. And the answer was simple: the boy who had suffered that night no longer existed; was as dead as those lilac plumes, as all the flowers of that miraculous summer. Since then he had known a new heaven and a new earth. He had fallen in love. Neither pain nor rapture could move him now except through Cynthia.

No doubt his closer acquaintance with George Redlake contributed to this change. At the time of his visit to Wimpole Street he had burned with a passionate enthusiasm for his father's works. That great man, from whom he inherited a vicarious glory, could do no wrong; and nobody who failed to share that ideal infatuation was worth considering. At closer quarters this high-coloured vision had lost much of its brightness. The beauty of George Redlake's works was still inviolate, inviolable; they still represented the triumphant performance of all Jim's own aspirations. On the surface George Redlake's appearance reflected his works' magnificence, but the inner man belied these heroic spiritual attributes. He was vain, he was grossly material, he was weak, he was greedy. Above all, he was cruel. Jim could never forget the veiled hostility he had surprised in his father's eyes; that vision of the dark-winged raven, fiercely impending; that meaner vision, so destructive of all illusion, of the amorous woodcock puffed and elated by the lush sentiment of Louisa Parrot—or was it, perhaps, by her sables and step-cut emeralds?

It was when he found himself contrasting his mother with Mrs. Parrot that Jim felt most tenderly toward her. As a child, at Sedgebury, he had taken her for granted. At Wimpole Street, on that ghastly night, he had been too blinded by prejudice to see her at all.

Now, eagerly endeavouring to recapture her neglected image, he found it invested by his own remorse with a pitiful quality. Comparing her rather sordid lodgings with his father's "cute little apartment," her fragile, aging features with Mrs. Parrot's state of plump preservation, her neat, pathetic clothes with Mrs. Parrot's Parisian adornments, he was filled with an emotion which was not only tender but protective. He saw her at last, most clearly, in two separate guises: in the first as she had appeared to him on the night before their flight from Sedgebury, kneeling at his bedside in the grey summer night and asking him if he loved her: in the second as he had seen her a few months before in Bayswater, a little girl, standing in her petticoat, brushing her hair—so fragile, so tender, so innocent, so wronged. And he, with the callousness of boyhood, had contributed to that wrong! If only for the comfort of his own soul he must make amends.

That evening, abandoning his work, he determined to do so. Tramping westward he made his way to the lodgings in Bayswater and tremulously—for he dreaded the emotional scene that awaited him—rang the bell. A strange, slatternly woman opened the door.

"Can I see my mother?" he asked.

"Your mother?"

"Mrs. Redlake."

The woman shook her head. "Never heard of her. I'm a stranger here myself," she explained. "We only came in at Michaelmas."

He supposed it was late in the day to call at Wimpole Street, yet, while he was still in the neighbourhood, he might just as well try. The house, with its rows of brass plates, had the peculiar deadness of professional chambers after consulting hours. The bell-push marked "day" evoked no response, and "night" gave no better result. On reflection he supposed he was a "visitor." Apparently visitors were not expected. As a last resort he tried "servants," and, after a long interval of silence, a sound of reluctant footsteps in the hall and a rattle of bolt-chains preluded the appearance of his old friend the *tricoteuse*, Madame Defarge, with a bundle of knitting still clasped in her strong left hand.

"Oh, it's *you*, is it?" she said, peering at him as though she still had hopes of an urgent major operation.

Jim explained his errand. "I've been round to my mother's lodgings," he said. "But the woman knew nothing about her. I thought you might help me to find her."

The *tricoteuse* pursed her lips and shook her head blankly.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I can't. I suppose you know that poor Doctor Fosdyke's been ill for the last two months? Yes, a perforated duodenal ulcer!" She warmed to the gory details. "A beautiful case! In the morning you'd have said he was just his ordinary self, and by six in the evening they had him on the table. A narrow squeak, too," she added, with macabre satisfaction. "Another half-hour, they say, and it 'ld have been good-bye! Dr. Reynolds, who's doing his work, says he won't be back for a long time. He's abroad at the moment."

"And my mother?" Jim asked.

"Well, naturally she doesn't come here now. Dr. Reynolds' own secretary looks after all *his* appointments."

"Can you even suggest . . .?"

"No, I haven't the faintest idea. I was saying to myself only this morning that she might have dropped me a line."

"If I sent her a letter care of Dr. Fosdyke, you could send it to him, and he'd be able to forward it."

"Yes, of course—if he knows where she is," she added as though anxious not to commit herself. "It's a roundabout way, the doctor's letters go every week to Cook's, at Rome."

By this time Madame Defarge was already making up for lost time by beginning to knit. She shivered: "Ugh! It's cold standing here. It feels like snow. Good-bye! You take care of yourself, young man, or you'll get pneumonia. It's just the right weather for it," she gloated, as she closed the door on him.

Well, so much for his good intentions! He could do no more, for the present, than go home and write to his mother, though that, God knew, would be difficult. If the letter went round by Italy he couldn't hear news of her, in any case, for several weeks. The more he thought of it, the more sinister and mysterious her vanishing seemed. He had an uncomfortable feeling that Madame Defarge, for all her apparent candour, had been evading him. There was something queer and chilling about the whole business. "Imagination!" he thought; "it's the weather; it's going to snow. I'll hurry back and get that letter off at once."

By the time that Jim reached his lodgings it was snowing in earnest; the falling flakes glittered in the gaslight from every frond of their flowery crystals. Even Lupus Street itself seemed transfigured, that soft, sterile coverlet obliterating the litter of the open market that strewed the gutters. The shop windows of the other side were bleared with moisture that the glacial air condensed; yet the coming of the snow, after that day of bleak greyness, seemed to have lightened and exhilarated all human spirits. The muffled women, the men with their collars turned up, smiled at Jim as they passed, as though this new freak of nature had united them to him in a new, adventurous companionship; the children darted about with excited cries and glowing faces; on the steps of number thirty-nine the Major was standing; he beamed on the whitening street as though it were a spectacle expressly staged for his delight and diversion.

"I see you've caught it all right, Sir," he said with a wink, welcoming Jim's snow-dusted figure. He laughed, like the rest of them, out of sheer lightness of heart. "Nice weather for a general election, I *don't* think!" he said. "I see by the paper it's fixed for December the fifth."

Of course, Jim reflected, a general election was the natural-sequel to the dissolution of Parliament that the news-sheets had announced. The tangles of contemporary politics could mean nothing to him. But they could, and they did, as he knew two days later, when the thaw had set in and a slush-sodden postman delivered Cynthia's letter. *Dear Count Fersen,* he read with amazement:

Now don't ever say I forget my promises! I'm afraid it's no good. We're off to Thorpe Folville to-morrow. We've all got to fight this blessed general election, though everyone says it's utterly hopeless. However, we shall all be back in town before Christmas in time for the Revolution. Do you think you could find me some nice cheap lodgings and a dignified job for father? He'd look perfectly splendid in a commissionaire's uniform, and could wear all his orders, poor dear!

A bientôt! Cynthia.

P.S. By the way, Anne (Anne Mortimer, my cousin, you know) fell violently in love with you. If there is a revolution, you could live quite well on her pearls. Just bear it in mind.

Jim treasured this scribble grimly. Every word was so like her—yet, alas! so like that part of her tantalizing, protean self which bewildered and distressed him. Could she never take him, herself, the confused world, seriously? Would she never return to the mood of those starry September nights at Thorpe Folville when they two, their remote and so different worlds forgotten, had created a shining, secret world of their own, out of space, out of time—like a new star born of their beings' fiery conjunction? Through that letter he sought in vain for one term of endearment, one hint of tenderness. Why, her mocking postscript was a very negation of this. That she could speak, even lightly, of his loving anyone else, was deliberate sacrilege. And as for the Christmas meeting to which she referred so cheerfully: by that time, as she must know quite well, if she gave it a thought, he himself would be back at Thorpe for the winter vacation.

To relieve, or at least to forget this sense of frustration, he threw himself violently into his work. None too soon, for within a few days the terminal examinations would be on him, and the dreams which he had translated into verse had distracted his mind from his studies. As soon as his hospital hours were over he would shut himself up in his room with the neglected textbooks, forswearing the theatres and dissipations of all kind—which was fortunate, as he already found himself overspent and mildly in debt—rarely leaving his fireside except to chat with Miss Moger over her buttered muffins.

The fact that Jim knew the Essendines—discreetly communicated to her, no doubt, by the Major—far from giving Miss Moger embarrassment, had made her feel that he was connected, morganatically, so to speak, with herself. The association of ideas had the effect of recalling her, whenever they met, to memories of her own Victorian efflorescence in which that "old rip" Cynthia's grandfather appeared in a heroic role, with an accompanying chorus of gorgeous, free-handed "mashers" and "Champagne Charlies." The riotous scenes which she depicted were hard to reconcile with Jim's own conception of the "old rip's" son, George Essendine; but those times, as Miss Moger declared with a sigh, were dead and gone.

"No nobleman in these days would dance cakewalks on a supper table, dearie. At the dear old Blue Posts I've seen as many as three of them prancing in a row, *and* fire-buckets full of fizz, mind you!"

She shook her great chins. "That's what's wrong with the House of Lords, dearie. That's why they're all U.P. No joy de veeve! You've got a spark of it yourself"—she lowered her voice scornfully—"But look at that Starling!"

That Starling, which Jim was abruptly invited to look at, was not one of those spangled, metallic visitors who, at this time of year came to town, frequenting the neighbouring Inn-gardens, wrangling with the sparrows and chattering at dawn about the chimney-pots, but the new tenant of the groundfloor front, just beneath Miss Moger. He had given her great offence, not only by declining, politely enough, her summons to an audience, but also by his obvious and lamentable lack of joy de veeve. Like Mr. Cortachy he was, according to Mrs. Pooley, a "littery" gentleman. Unlike Mr. Cortachy, he followed his calling at home: "At all hours of the day *and* night!" Miss Moger complained. "No sooner have I slipped off into my beauty-sleep than that Starling starts rumbling. That chap with the punching-ball was a daisy, but Starling beats him holler. Oo-oo-oo-oo!" And Miss Moger dramatically imitated the effect of a level voice reading aloud on the floor beneath. "Yes, and what is he rumbling about down there like the Underground?" she asked suspiciously. "That's what I'd like to know!"

Jim couldn't help her. Although, out of loyalty to Miss Moger, he already felt that he detested Starling by proxy, he never set eyes on him till one night, a week or two later, when a violent knock on his door disturbed his labours.

"Come in!" he shouted; and Mr. Starling entered.

He was a young man of medium height in a much-worn Jaeger dressing-gown; very dark, with masses of strong black hair and the dead-white smutty complexion that one associates with the wearers of dungarees. His brow was massive, and cleft, at the root of a flattened, pugnacious nose, by a zed-shaped wrinkle like a deep incision. His sunken eyes smouldered fiercely as coals; the thick lips were vividly red. Jim might easily have taken him for a motor-mechanic who did a little boxing "on the side," till he looked at his hands, which were small, white, and delicately-shaped, though long-nailed and stained at the finger-tips with two kinds of ink.

"Got any tobacco?" he demanded, as though he were prepared to enforce the request with his fists.

It was so surprising that Jim simply tossed him his pouch. Starling caught at it clumsily and dropped it. His hands were trembling.

"What's this stuff?" he asked contemptuously, with a Midland accent.

It was a special mixture, Jim told him, of Fribourg and Treyer's.

"Who the devil are they? Is it German? Well, I reckon I must smoke it. I'm accustomed to shag myself," he added, gruffly. "But I'm run out to-night and can't work without the damned stuff."

He half emptied the pouch, then handed it back to Jim. Ever since his precipitate entrance he had been looking nervously about him, like a shy wild animal fearful of being trapped.

"Thanks," he said, almost grudgingly. "Your name's Redlake, isn't it? Are you any . . ."

Jim forestalled the question. "Yes, he's my father." He pointed to a chair. "Sit down and light up," he said. "Do you know his work?"

"I do," said Starling, speaking between his teeth.

"Do you like it?"

"I loathe it like poison," said Starling savagely.

Jim laughed. "Well, that's putting it plainly enough. Why don't you like it?"

"Because it's dead. The breath of life isn't in it. Dry, calcined bones! Is that a good enough reason?"

Good Lord, Jim thought; here's our old friend Joy de Veeve. Miss Moger's mistaken! He smiled.

"You're laughing at me, are you?" Starling went on fiercely. He saw that his pipe had gone out. "How d'you keep this damn stuff alight?" he complained.

"Try a match."

Starling glared at him, not quite sure how to take the suggestion.

"Excuse me," he said. "When I get on to George Redlake I go in at the deep end. Let's give him his due. He's a polished writer. He probably knows more about words than any man living—*and* less about life," he added, flaring up again. "Now *I* come from the Midlands . . ."

"I'd gathered that," Jim said.

It was rude; it was damnably rude; it was unpardonable; he just couldn't help it. The effect on Starling was like that of turning the switch of an electric furnace. He became incandescent.

"I come from the Black Country," he almost shouted. "My father's a boiler-maker who shaves once a week and washes to the waist on a Saturday. My mother's a poor damned drudge—eight kids in nine years she had, brought up like a litter of pigs in a back-to-back sty. My brothers work in the pits, my sisters in a factory. We went to the British Schools—the ragged schools as they call them. I'm a polished product of primary education, that's what I am, brought up on a vocabulary about as big as an African negro's. When I first read a real book I had to take a dictionary to it to find out the meaning of words you've known all your life. Now do you understand why I loathe what your father stands for? No . . . that isn't true. I loathe him because I'm jealous of him. Now, say what you like!"

There was nothing to say, Jim felt, unless he apologized for his own discourtesy. It was late in the day for that, and it mightn't mend matters either.

"You're a writer yourself?" he asked.

"I've published one book—a novel. A failure, naturally. Now I'm writing another. That'll be a failure too." He laughed harshly. "I don't care a twopenny damn if it is!"

He cared very much, Jim thought. "What kind of novel are you writing now?" he asked.

"You needn't trouble to be polite," Starling answered resentfully. "Just a novel."

"I'm not. I'm enormously interested."

Starling's eyes bored through him like a searchlight, like Röntgen rays. "I've finished the matches," he said pathetically. "Have you got another box? This novel? Well, if you must know, it's about as different from your father's as you can imagine. The people in it don't care a damn for any of the things he cares for. They aren't witty, thank God, and they don't show off all the time. They're concerned with essentials—or what I think are essentials. They're alive—I tell you they must, they *must* be alive, if I put the last drop of my blood, the last breath of my spirit into them. Not living corpses. Alive!" As he spoke the word his mean person seemed to expand, like a djinn released from a bottle, into something huge and vaporous. As he towered above Jim his flapping dressing-gown trailed clouds of glory. Good Lord, Jim thought, is this genius? But before the thought faded the vision had faded too. The high vapours dissolved. In their place he saw before him a humble, puzzled, an almost childish creature, who shook his head feebly and held an unlit pipe in his trembling hands. The fire in his eyes had gone out; the fierce spirit had spent itself; he turned on Jim with a pitiful weak little laugh. Even his voice had lost its timbre.

"Showing off, did I say?" he murmured apologetically. "My Lord! Hark at me! What I said was all my eye. My novel's just Whitman and Nietzsche in words of one syllable. Still, I'd better get down and have another slog at it, I suppose. If I don't, I shall soon be whistling. Well, Mr. Redlake . . ."

"Oh, drop the mister," said Jim.

Starling flushed with pleasure. "All right. We've had a nice little chat; I'm glad I came. It does one good to talk to a human being. This tobacco's A 1, by the way, too classy for me, though. I say, I wish—" he hesitated—"I wish you'd pop in downstairs any time you're passing and have a minute to spare."

"No, you come up here," Jim said. "I don't want to disturb your work."

"My room's clean enough though you mightn't expect it, you won't pick anything up there," said Starling, with a flash of the old fire. "And as for my work—" He laughed. "What the hell does that matter? It'll be all the same in a hundred years, and the book'll be remaindered and pulped in eighteen months anyway. Can I take these matches?"

"Of course."

He went. This strange visit was the beginning of an intimacy which scandalized Miss Moger—who felt that a friend of the Essendines lost caste by associating with that rumbler, as she called him—and astonished Mrs. Pooley, who, even though he paid in advance, distrusted her new lodger as a vegetarian and a small eater at that. Jim's friendship with Starling would have been interesting if only because of its complete contrast with that of the lost Julian, now impressing his brilliant qualities on Oxford society. It was a ticklish association; for the man was so sensitive that Jim never knew at what moment an innocent word might not release the hair-trigger of Starling's inferiority complex and blow everything up sky-high in an explosion of fierce, unreasoning violence. As an alternative to exploding Starling would sometimes shut up like an oyster, consuming himself in a tight-lipped, icy silence, out of which he stared at the world with dark eyes full of hatred, sunk deep in a face which resembled that of a martyr at the stake. This reaction Jim noticed first one day when, by chance, he mentioned the Essendines' name. When the fit was over, Starling made his usual timid apology.

"I saw red," he explained, "when you spoke of the Earl of Essendine. He and the Marques of Clun draw mineral royalties from most of the pits in our district. Every ton that my brothers hew underground has the profit sucked out of it by one or the other of them. They may both be quite charming people—I don't know and don't want to know—but for me they're just parasites who keep down wages."

And he went on to talk, without passion or bitterness, of life as he knew and had lived it in the miners' cottages at Mawne and Sedgebury. "You people, when you talk of poverty, don't know what it means. Overcrowding, short commons, adulterated food, occupation diseases—they're all just words in a newspaper. What none of you realize or will ever realize is the devastating lack of privacy—the fact that the lower classes—the words beg the question! —can keep nothing to themselves; every function of their bodies is public property, every secret of their souls is scrutinized. What a pity we're not modest and refined and sanitary! You try it, Redlake, with ten people living in a four-roomed house in winter!"

Jim listened, yet, as he did so, he was thinking of Cynthia, that fragile, orchid-hued creature, so delicately nurtured on the wealth that was sucked from the depths of so much misery. A parasite, was she? He supposed all orchids were parasites. . . .

"I lived there," Starling was rumbling, "like a potato in a dark cellar, reaching out to life and the light with pale, blanched shoots . . ."

Yes, of course that's quite true, Jim thought, that's just what he's like. The figure explained to perfection that pallid brow, those weak, white tremulous hands that were never still. It explained, again, the force of his inherent vitality repressed and exhibiting itself in such mad and sudden violence. Life . . . life. . . . Whenever he spoke from his heart the word would return like a *leit motiv* in an opera. It haunted his speech with a hungry urgency, as though he were aware how much life he had lost already, and were striving to make up the deficiency by sheer dogged determination. It was the touchstone by which he judged every work of art, every human activity: the criterion by which the works of George Redlake so lamentably failed.

Perhaps life meant even more to him because his own tenure of it was so precarious. Though he boasted of his hardiness, the least change of weather would upset his body's delicate equilibrium; the lightest of colds would fly to his chest and set him wheezing and coughing for days on end. At such times, being incapable of work himself, he began to take a grim delight in distracting Jim from his; he would come toiling upstairs in his shabby dressing-gown, relapse with a sigh into Jim's most comfortable chair, and rumble unceasingly, with that flat, Midland accent and husky voice. "If I can't write," he declared, "I *must* talk to somebody." And though Jim could ill afford this waste of his working hours, he never failed to succumb to the charm and diversity of that restless mind.

In spite of his startling *lacunæ* Starling's knowledge of literature, and particularly of philosophy, was wide and even profound. Jim was often ashamed to find himself out of his depth; yet, compared with his personal arrogance, the man's intellectual attitude was curiously humble. He was enormously impressed, for example, by the fact that Jim could read Greek.

"To think that you can tackle Plato and Aristotle in the original!" he said. "I'd give my eyes to do that! Never mind, I'll manage it some day!"

"I don't see that you need," Jim told him. "There are plenty of good translations."

"Translations! Don't talk damned rot! No translation can give you the flavour of the living word on your tongue. It's the difference between specimens in a herbarium and a living flower. Who's Jowett? To hell with Jowett! You can keep your translations!"

At other times, when his brain was too tired for exertion, he would talk in a childlike, humorous vein, of his home-life at Sedgebury: of the British school, where he had worked as a boy and, later, taught other children; of the friends and relations from whose ken he had sailed away like a drifting balloon; of the girls he had kissed on dark nights in the gritty black country lanes, or cuddled, as he called it, in the warmth of brick-kilns or smouldering pit-mounds; of school-treats and football crowds and the naphtha-lit saturnalia of fairs and wakes. A remote, incredible life it seemed to Jim; yet Starling clung to it with a richly passionate nostalgia—as though, indeed, his present existence as a writer toiling in London were a fantastic dream, and that other the only reality. He dwelt on it so lovingly, perhaps, for that very reason; because the contrast enhanced his dream's magnificence. Yet, even so, his regard for his parents and those brothers and sisters he had left so far behind was genuine and touching, as Jim felt when he found him, one day, excitedly wrapping up little parcels for Christmas, or inscribing a number of picture-postcards—the Bank of England, the Law Courts, the Tower, Buckingham Palace—with naïve and carefully adapted annotations, such as: *This is where the King lives. Yours to a cinder, Ted.* "My folk think the world of Christmas," Starling told him.

As soon as the weather cleared they went for long walks together, in the wintry parks, by the frozen Serpentine, but even more often through the bricky purlieus of the Essex Road, from whose swarming babel Starling appeared to absorb the life for which he lusted. During the year he had spent in London he had never set foot in Mayfair—"That great stucco cemetery!" he called it—while the West End nauseated him, he said, with its stink of money.

It was during one of these wanderings that Jim found courage at last to speak of his own attempts at writing.

"I'll have a look at them, if you like," said Starling almost contemptuously.

Jim gave him his manuscripts that evening. Starling took them without a word to his room downstairs. A week passed; the date of Jim's departure to Thorpe was drawing near; but Starling had never mentioned them.

"By the way, those poems of mine . . ." Jim timidly suggested.

"Oh, yes. I'll fetch them."

"Well, what about it?" Jim asked when he returned.

"Do you want me to tell you the truth?"

"Of course I do."

Starling shook his head hopelessly. "All this footling stuff about love. You don't know what love is. It's love in a clerical collar—you write like a curate. Love-poems! Our dear friend the Vicar's revised them with a blue pencil. Good God, man, you don't even know that women have bodies!" And he went on to prove that they had, in considerable anatomical detail.

Jim flushed as he listened. A confused anger seized him. That the Dantesque ideal of Cynthia should be smirched with such words! Starling, quite unaware, apparently, of Jim's feelings, went on with his lecture, till, all of a sudden, hardly knowing how it had happened, Jim found himself struggling with Starling, his hands at his throat.

"You foul little guttersnipe!" he was shouting. "You swine! How dare you?"

Starling's pale face went red; he gurgled; he slipped from Jim's loosening hands to the floor. He lay, crumpled up, face downwards in his shabby dressing-gown.

"Good God! I've killed him!" Jim thought. He dropped down beside him. "Starling . . . Starling!" he cried.

Then, suddenly, Starling rolled over. He lay on his back, his head retracted, eyes closed. He lay there, gasping, like a dying fish, drinking in great draughts of air with a slobbering sound.

"Thank Heaven, he's not dead!" Jim thought.

"I say, Starling. I'm sorry," he said. "I saw red. I'm damned sorry," he repeated helplessly.

Starling opened his eyes. They stared wonderingly, blankly at Jim. Then there came into them the look of mingled fear and hatred that Jim knew so well. That look was unanswerable. He knew he could say no more. Laboriously, still noisily breathing through his clenched teeth, Starling rose to his knees. Jim put out a hand to steady him. He waved it away. Then he stumbled to his feet, and wrapping his dressing-gown round him with a curious dignity, staggered from the room.

"You sounded as if you were having a rare old beano upstairs last night," Miss Moger said next day with a tinge of envy. "You may say what you like, I was thinking, but there's nothing to touch the old fashioned harlequinade, slapstick and sausages and all!"

That particular beano had left Jim thoroughly ashamed. It took the best part of a sleepless night for his anger to evaporate; but as soon as he came to himself, the wrong seemed all on his side. Starling's standards of verbal politeness, after all, were different from his. He had asked for an honest opinion on his poems, and he had certainly got one—an opinion, moreover, that a sober, impersonal judgment must admit to be just. His poems *were* thin, they were flat, conventional, and self-conscious. But the justice or injustice of Starling's criticism was beside the point. It had been inexcusable, in any case, for a strong, healthy fellow like himself to use physical violence toward that half-starved wisp of a creature who, after all, at that moment had been his guest; even more so to throw the man's origins in his face. He wrote Starling a letter of profuse and abject apology and sent it down by the Major.

There was no answer, and this new lapse in manners on Starling's part put Jim in a slightly better opinion of himself. But even when the terminal examinations, in which he acquitted himself reasonably well, were over, he couldn't help dwelling upon the unfortunate incident and wondering if he might not have done Starling some serious harm.

By this time the purlieus of Lupus Street had begun to show an air of mild festiveness; shop-windows were decorated with Christmas-trees, paper frills, sprigs of holly, and drifts of cotton-wool snow frosted with mica; cascades of turkeys and geese drooped from them like stalactites; on the pavements ragged companies of infants, dressed up in long skirts, paraded and sang carols out of tune, begging for coppers. When Jim saw these pathetic manifestations he thought of Starling's grim solitary labours, and of the pitiful little presents which he had seen him wrapping up for "the folk at home." *Peace and good-will!* The position became intolerable.

In a state of profound discomfort and humility he knocked at Starling's door. A distracted voice bade him enter. Starling was at work. He glanced up impatiently, a dazed look in his eyes.

"Hello, Redlake," he said. "Is that you?"

"I just looked in to say good-bye," Jim told him awkwardly. "I'm off to-morrow."

"Lucky devil!" Starling grumbled.

"You got my letter?" Jim asked.

"Your letter? Oh, yes, of course. What d'you think about the election?" He smiled grimly. The smile said: No matter what you think, it means that I and my kind have the whip-hand of you and yours; you may treat me like dirt, but that won't make any difference!

"I imagine it's what everyone expected," Jim said. He thought: I suppose we shall go on pretending to be friends, but it'll never be quite the same. I'm a real bourgeois in a narrow world of my own. The gap between Starling and me is as wide as that between me and the Essendines. How queer it all is!

"How's the book going on?" he politely enquired.

"The darned thing's nearly finished. Of course *you* won't like it," Starling added harshly.

"Well, I suppose I must get on with my packing," Jim said, disregarding the thrust. "Good-bye!" He held out his hand. Starling took it. His fingers were clammy.

"I shall miss you a bit. So long!" he said. "Hope you'll enjoy yourself." He ran his fingers through his black hair and returned to his work.

Next morning, when the cab stood waiting to take him to St. Pancras, the heavily-laden postman handed him a letter. "From Cynthia," he thought. It was not from her, but from his mother. He read it as he drove to the station. His letter, she told him tenderly, had given her great happiness; but the tone of her own was vague and remote, and she gave no address to which he might reply. The stamp, however, was Italian, and the postmark that of San Remo.

IV. *Last Ride Together*

THE shadow of his letter overhung Jim's journey to Thorpe. In London, where most of his life had been spent indoors, he had hardly realized the grip that Winter laid on the country. A mortal stillness possessed the Midland plain, the brown, frost-bitten fields, the black hedgerows, the skeletal trees. Here and there the tawny opaqueness of unabsorbed flood-water reflected a sky whose density throttled the sun's half-hearted light.

At Melton he was met by Ernest—an Ernest much less like Lord Essendine than Jim remembered him. His uniform was shabby; a grey growth lay like rime on his red-scraped chin. If he grew a beard, Jim thought, it would be quite white. How strange to think that when first I knew him he collected matchboxes!

"Well, Ernest, you look half-frozen," he said.

Ernest shook his head grimly. "It's been no sort of weather, Mr. Jim. It's eased a bit now; but the frost's still down in the ground a good two spade-spits. There's more 'orses' legs been broke this season than I'd care to mention. Neither the Quorn nor the Thorpe's been out for a fortnight, and then no scent lying to speak of. Why, half of the gentry's packed up their traps and left."

"Has the doctor been out much?" Jim asked.

Ernest shook his head sadly. "Not enough to exercise the cattle. No, Mr. Jim. I'm afraid you'll notice a great change in the doctor, this time," he said. "He's beginning to show Annie Dominoes, I reckon, like the rest of us. Well, we've all got to come to it, I suppose; but it's took him sudden-like. Not but what he keeps up his spirits wonderful, mind you. He's a rare old stayer, is the doctor. But you'll see for yourself."

"Everyone else all right, I hope?" Jim asked.

"Oh, you can't beat the mistress!" Ernest laughed. "And Miss Margaret's in fettle. Cautain Mohun's due down next week: goin' to stable in Oakham. But this blooming election, you know, has kicked the bottom out of sport. His lordship, he gave it 'em straight, mind. But no, they won't have it! A fine pickle they'd be in without the poultry-fund. If the hunting goes, they go. They don't know which side their bread's buttered. They lap up the stuff they get fed in the blooming newspapers. Why, two of his lordship's tenants had the nerve to vote labour! It's not natural nor right, I say. Grumble, grumble. . . . And what's the result. Cutting down of expenses and men out of work. Well, look at the Castle! Four chaps got the boot there last week! So it stands to reason, don't it?"

Though Ernest omitted to state just what it was that stood to reason, there was no doubt, Jim thought, about the decadence of Thorpe Castle as judged from the desolate aspect of the gate-house, past which the dog-cart rolled briskly as the mare smelt her stable. The massive gates of wrought-iron were closed, as against a siege; the gilt coronet that surmounted them had gone black; paint peeled in flakes from the rusty bars. Even Miss Minnet's Rose Cottage, that humble satellite, seemed to have lost lustre from the fading of the greater light, facing the road with its leafless creepers and empty window-boxes. And indeed, had Jim only known, Miss Minnet's present was even shadier than her past. Her pretty maid, Edith, was going to have a baby, the name of whose father only heaven (or perhaps Mr. Dewpoint) knew. It was, as Miss Minnet rightly said, the first time that anything of *that* kind had happened in *her* house.

But at The Grange nothing seemed to have changed. On the lamplit tea-table the same Rockingham tea-set displayed its graceful shapes. At the head of it Mrs. Weston sat, bolt upright as usual, without a scintilla of difference in her dress, her mien, her voice, her very movements. Mr. Holly, who had dropped in for tea, he said, and sat at her right hand, was possibly a little more at home there than he used to be; the marmoset more shrivelled, Aunt Margaret plumper, and Lucy more rosily self-conscious in Mr. Holly's presence.

"Well, how goes the great world of fashion, Jim?" Mr. Holly demanded slyly.

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean, Mr. Holly," Jim said.

"Don't be silly. You know quite well, Jim," said Lucy. "He means have you seen Cynthia Folville."

"Oh, that? Yes, I went to lunch at Essendine House the other day."

"Then, you've lost your bet, Hubert," Lucy cried triumphantly. "Don't glower like that, Jim. It's only a little joke."

A joke in exceedingly bad taste, Jim thought; and since when and why had she taken to calling Mr. Holly "Hubert?" The second part of the mystery explained itself a few minutes later when Lucy and Mr. Holly retired to the drawing-room—"for a little music."

"A little music," Aunt Margaret repeated, mimicking Mr. Holly's refined inflection. "I don't hear any music yet," she said with a meaning smile as she returned to her trousseau.

"Where's grandpapa?" Jim asked.

"Still out on his round," Mrs. Weston informed him with a sigh. "The work's always heavy at this time of the year, of course. I'm glad," she said, changing the subject, "that you were invited to Essendine House. Did you go there alone, or was it a party?"

Jim reeled off a list of names.

"What? Lord Clun—*and* Royalty? Really?"

"How *is* grandpapa, grannie?" Jim pressed her, remembering Ernest's words.

"He says he's quite well," Mrs. Weston answered coldly. "He's a doctor. He ought to know. And he's touchy about his own health. Of course he's tired; that's only to be expected. He needs help. I wish we could afford to have an assistant. I hope you did well in your examination? Well, that's one comfort anyway. Did you say Lady Eleanor Purefoy?"

"Lady *Elizabeth*, mother," said Aunt Margaret, her mouth full of pins. "The woman whose photographs are in all the papers. I expect she's really a fright."

"You were presented to the princess, I hope?" Mrs. Weston enquired.

But before Jim could answer, his grandfather had entered the room.

"Ah, so here's the young man. That's splendid!" he cried. "Did you have a good journey?"

His voice was as kindly and bluff and cheerful as ever; but when he moved into the lamplight and Jim saw his face, his heart sank. Dr. Weston's neat, wiry figure had always been spare. He had ridden the same weight, as he boasted, for forty odd years, and, indeed, could not well have been thinner. The things that shocked Jim were his face and his smiling eyes; for the first, though still largely concealed by his whiskers and beard, which he seemed to have left untrimmed to conceal these changes, from the brows to the back of the bald scalp had the coppery hue of dried pig's-bladder, beneath which the twin temporal arteries stood out like whipcord; and the second, though bluer than ever by contrast, seemed deeply sunken between the pigmented eyelids above and the puffed pouches beneath them. When he pulled up his chair to the table his breath came quickly, as though he were short of it, and the stronger lamplight showed that the iris of each eye was encircled by the opaque, opaline rim of an *arcus senitis*. Was it only, Jim wondered, his new anatomical knowledge that made him notice these signs—those knotted arteries, that opaline rim? Perhaps they had always been there; his grandfather, after all, was an old man. The others, as far as he could judge, seemed quite unaware of them. Were they blind, or was it true, as people said, that the changes of disease were so gradual that those who lived with an invalid could rarely see them, accommodating themselves, by daily, hourly adjustments, to accept each new symptom as natural? Was that the explanation of his grandmother's unconcern? Or was it rather that, knowing the worst, she deliberately played up to her husband's courageous demeanour, allowing him and the world to imagine that she saw nothing wrong, pretending that all was well? That, too, would be like her, Jim thought. In any case, he could not attempt to probe the mysterious relationship of these two. For himself, he only knew that in the last three months Dr. Watson had aged ten years.

This reflection still troubled him when he went to bed that evening. There was something strange in the nocturnal silence of Thorpe; his ears missed the homely patter of late footsteps on the Lupus Street pavements, the hushed bourdon of distant traffic for ever whirring like some huge dynamo to illumine the tawny London sky. Here night was a muffling blackness, unperturbed by any sound but the sudden cries of owls exulting in the long, dark hours. He awoke, very early it seemed, to a noise of bells. "Christmas Day," he thought lazily, and, turning, remembered the excited Christmas awakenings of his childhood at Sedgebury—how his hands had groped out in the dark to seek for that empty stocking, miraculously filled in the night; how his fingers had cunningly examined its uneven contours, mysterious square boxes, enchanting cylinders, the all-too-obvious spheres of oranges. "But I mustn't examine them," he thought dreamily, "till mother comes in and turns up the gas. Till mother comes in . . ."

And the vision of Sedgebury receded, giving place to one of a grey, oblong envelope with an Italian stamp and the blurred postmark of San Remo. "Dr. Fosdyke's in Italy," he thought, "and she's there too—unless, of course, she sent him the letter to post. But that's too ridiculous. She wouldn't do anything of the sort. No. She must be in Italy. And Dr. Fosdyke too. Was it possible . . .? No, no; he refused to even think of it!"

"Merry Christmas, Master Jim!"

The marmoset danced in, smiling, with his morning tea.

"Same to you, Eliza!" he yawned. "What time's breakfast? Nine o'clock? By Jove, I shall have to buck up!"

It was rather fun, after all, this holiday air: the parcels of presents on the breakfast table; the affected childishness; the great ham of Mrs. Weston's own curing; the home-made pork pie; the canaries shrilling away like mad in the morning sun ("Sweet, sweee-t!" Aunt Margaret mimicked) and everybody kissing each other and wishing merry Christmases. Even the doctor seemed to have shed his weariness as he playfully kissed Jim's grandmother under the mistletoe. Perhaps, after all, he wasn't so ill as he looked.

After breakfast small groups of village children came singing carols. On the table in the pitch-pine hall there was a bowl full of bright new pennies and threepenny bits for them, and five-shilling pieces in envelopes and packets of tea for old pensioners of Mrs. Weston's who hobbled up, of course not expecting them, with the season's greetings. Then farm-lads rode up with great cylinders of Stilton cheese from the doctor's tenants, and sprigs of mistletoe in their caps, on the chance of a kiss by the way. And then church-bells clanging away through the gay, bright air; Mrs. Weston sternly waiting for Aunt Margaret, who was late as usual, to put on her hat. And then, down the street, a regular gauntlet to be run of smiles and greetings, and the bells growing louder every minute, and everyone hurrying; and, at last, the stone chancel, the green-garlanded Norman pillars, and the thin, reedy wailing of Miss Minnet's organ hopelessly competing with the clangour of bells overhead.

Christ-ians a-wake! Sal-ute the hap-py Morn!

Over the top of the curtain that concealed the organ-stool, Jim could see the big artificial cherries in Miss Minnet's hat bobbing exultantly to the rhythm of the music; beneath it, Miss Minnet's buttoned boots triumphantly pounded the pedals. At the side of the Westons' pew rose the formidable erection, roofed like a catafalque, reserved and cushioned for the private slumbers of the Essendine family. It was empty. Where, oh where was she now? Jim wondered.

"Isn't that red cross of holly-berries lovely?" Lucy whispered. "Aunt Margaret and I made it."

Miss Minnet, transported by religious ecstasy, had begun to improvise. The red cherries were motionless now. The sun, slanting through a stained window, lay on the organ keys. "Like a picture," Miss Minnet thought. "*The Soul's Awakening*. Oh, I wish I'd been christened Cecilia!"

Mr. Jewell, in a starched clean surplice, moved slowly to the pulpit. Miss Minnet, quite carried away by herself, went on improvising. What a ravishing modulation! she thought. Mr. Jewell stood up there waiting for her. Why couldn't the woman stop? He looked at his wife, who gave Miss Minnet a poke through the curtain. Miss Minnet, taken by surprise, stamped on a pedal. The organ growled and stopped. Mr. Jewell put on his spectacles and read out his text:

"And she brought forth her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddlin' clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. The second chapter of the Holy Gospel according to St. Luke, and the seventh verse."

Mr. Jewell removed his spectacles and flapped his surplice like the wings of a great white owl. His eyes swept the church, particularly that corner of it where the schoolchildren had not yet ceased to fidget. There was a silence broken only by the creaking of chairs or the crack of a peppermint. The subject of his sermon was not, as might be imagined, the Nativity, but the recent general election and, in passing, the Navy League.

The festival of Christmas, he said, was particularly dear to all those present, old and young, as members of the Reformed, Protestant Church of England. Their Church, he reminded them, was a national Church, and as English in nature as it was in name. It did not fritter away its religious emotions over a number of minor saint's-days and festivals which, in continental countries, alas, were all too frequently made an excuse for dissipation and idleness. They all loved Christmas because they were English; because Christmas, as everyone knew, was a peculiarly English festival. Who in the world, Mr. Jewell asked, could think of Christmas without it calling to mind the picture of an English yuletide—the snow on the ground, the simple but tasteful decorations of holly, the Yule log burnin', and village church-bells pealin'?

(At San Remo, Jim thought, the tideless sea shines like a butterfly's wing; the palm-trees rustle, the air is soft with a scent of plumy mimosa and orange-blosssom. Why didn't she mention Dr. Fosdyke's name when she wrote that letter, or even say she was in Italy?)

They all loved Christmas, again Mr. Jewell said firmly, because it reminded them that Our Lord was not only the Son of God but also the son of a woman—because it reminded them of His humanity. It made them think of Him as a little child, a helpless infant such as each of them and he himself had been. *She brought forth her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddlin' clothes.*

(Miss Minnet, devoutly staring at a page of music, had a vision of a tiny pink baby, with black button eyes shining out of a crinkled red face. If you gave it your finger, she thought, its fingers would close on it. Sweet little creatures! Although, of course, she had sinned, it would be wonderful for Edith to have her baby. Supposing, when it came, she consented to take Edith back again and adopted the child? It was one's duty to forgive; it seemed cruel that a helpless little baby should suffer because of its mother's wickedness; and how lovely it would be to have a baby at Rose Cottage! If one couldn't have a baby of one's own, why not have one of somebody else's? If only Mrs. Jewell approved! But of course she wouldn't, Miss Minnet reflected.)

"*And laid him in a manger,*" Mr. Jewell went on impressively. The cradle of the King of Kings was an ordinary manger, probably of olive-wood, in a lowly stable. There was a lesson for all of them in that. In these days, alas, an un-Christian desire for sinful luxury and ostentation was insidiously invadin' their simple country life; they were apt to forget the lesson of Our Saviour's humility. Let those of them into whose ears, during the last few months, paid emissaries of the devil had whispered counsels of wicked discontent, reflect, for one moment, as they returned to their comfortable firesides, on that Manger, that lowly stable, in which God Almighty decreed that His beloved Son should be born. What was the lesson that that lowly stable taught them as Christian men and women and children? Surely it was this: that no true Christian should ever endeavour to change the lot to which it had pleased God to call him. Let them remember the words of the text: *Because there was no room for them in the inn.* (The inn? Good heavens, Mrs. Weston thought, I've forgotten to put out the brandy for the sauce and the cellarette's locked! I wonder if Eliza will have the sense to get some from the Blue Boar, or go upstairs to my room and look for the key. How very annoying!)

"*The inn,*" Mr. Jewell repeated. "There was no room for them there. Did St. Joseph, the carpenter, and the Virgin Mary protest? Did they try to force themselves loudly into a room that was already occupied? No, indeed! They trusted, as you and I should trust, in God's Providence. If they were poor, they were proud of that dignified station; if they were an-hungered, they realized that it was all for the best. Remember"—and here Mr. Jewell wagged his beard solemnly—"remember, my friends, that there cannot be room in the inn for all of us. That is how God, in His infinite mercy, has ordered the world. All clergymen cannot be Archbishops nor all angels archangels; all laymen cannot be noblemen. It is not for you nor even for me to question the rulin's of Providence on earth, or try with our mean and selfish envies to upset the order of mankind. It is the duty of every Christian to accept his lot on earth as it is, in the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection, when all that is crooked shall be made straight, when the humble and meek shall be exalted and the last shall be first. That, my dear brethren, is the truth we should all remember on this day when we meet to celebrate the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ!"

During this peroration Mr. Jewell, conscious of his high political responsibility, had spoken with a slow, deliberate impressiveness. Now, flapping his white wings again as though preparing to take flight, and having gabbled through his doxology, he announced the offertory hymn: "Christians Awake!" A number of them did so. The fluttering of hymn-book pages rustled through the church like a sigh of relief. Miss Minnet, in a frenzy of enthusiasm, pulled out every possible stop and stamped on her pedals so heavily that the feeble voices of choir and congregation, Mrs. Jewell's shrill treble excepted, were almost drowned.

"I've forgotten to give Eliza the brandy," said Mrs. Weston, as they all emerged into the clear, white air. "Will you go on, and give her the key of the cellarette, Lucy darling. It's on my dressing-table. I think Mr. Jewell was splendid for once," she added. "Quite short, and entirely to the point."

"The fellow has no business to talk politics from the pulpit," said Dr. Weston.

"Politics, my dear John? All he said was sound, Christian sense. I only wish Mr. Holly and Mr. Malthus had half as much courage and sense of responsibility! I approve most strongly of every word that he said."

Dr. Weston left it at that. He seemed, Jim thought, more than ever disinclined to differ with anything that the old lady insisted on. He was obviously a tired man, pathetically eager for peace at any price. During the weeks that followed Jim saw far more of him than he had ever seen before. The absence of the Essendines had turned Thorpe Folville into a desert; the iron frost made hunting impossible. He had no real friends. Mr. Holly, who, though not actually engaged to Lucy ("Far too young to know her own mind," Mrs. Weston said), was continually bobbing up against Jim in the house like an inquisitive bumble bee, could never become one; while the Malthus boys were all scattered and Catherine, his favourite among the girls, had suddenly vanished to Natal, where her brother Mark had "fallen on his feet," they said, and wanted a housekeeper. For the rest, the Thorpe Folville scene was so charged with sweet and painful memories of Cynthia that even if Dr. Weston hadn't shown himself so greedy for Jim's company, Jim would have sought his.

Apart from the tactical adjustments which experience had taught him to make in his relations with the old lady, the doctor had always appeared to Jim a strong, self-reliant person. His illness had changed all that. By the side of Jim's healthy, upright figure, Dr. Weston now looked pitiably bent and frail; in Jim's company he sought not only a physical but also a moral support, discarding, when they were alone, the mask of cheerfulness and unconcern that he wore in the sight of others. On the day after Christmas, when the last of the morning's patients had left the surgery, he took Jim into his confidence.

"Do you remember," he said, "one evening last summer when you came in late and found me here?"

"Quite well," Jim told him. It was a day he must always remember above all others.

"Do you remember that I was testing a specimen for albumen? Well, that specimen was my own. My kidneys have given way, Jim." He smiled, and his thin lips twitched beneath his white beard and moustache. "I'm suffering from chronic Bright's Disease. It's as well you should know."

"But you're treating it carefully, of course?" Jim asked. "You've consulted somebody?"

"No, no. I've been far too busy to see any specialist. It's quite unnecessary anyway. The case is plain-sailing. And I shouldn't like to alarm your grandmother by calling anyone in to consult. As for treatment—that's simple enough: a few changes of diet; no alcohol. Oh, I'm taking good care of myself. Don't worry about that."

"And you haven't told Gran?"

"Of course not. What good would it serve? She knows I'm not well; but I've made her believe that there's nothing serious. And she trusts me—fortunately, for your grandmother's a nervous woman, and easily worried. I shall keep her from knowing anything as long as I can; though how long that'll be I can't say."

"I really do think you ought to consult someone," Jim began.

"No, no. I'm an old man. I know just what's wrong and how to deal with it," he answered obstinately.

A few days later he spoke of his illness again. Indeed, he seemed happier for having unburdened himself of his secret.

"I'm afraid this mischief's progressing rather faster than I expected," he said with a timid smile. "I wish you'd just give me a hand with this sphygmanometer. It's much easier for two to read the blood-pressure than one."

He took off his coat and rolled up his flannel sleeve. The skin of his arm had the same yellowish pallor as that of his scalp; the arm itself looked curiously insubstantial, like that of a starved child in an Indian famine photograph.

"Strap this armlet right round," he said. "No . . . loosely. The pressure will come when you inflate it. Put your finger on the pulse. Can you feel it? That's right. Now pump away till the pulse quite vanishes while I watch the mercury."

Beneath Jim's finger the radial artery throbbed with the old man's heart-beats. That brave heart, whose pulsations had never ceased for sixty-six years, contracted now with the desperate energy of fatigue. It was horrible to think that this life, grown increasingly dear to him, depended on the strength of that narrowed channel, brittle as a pipestem, through which the tired heart pumped blood with so fierce an urgency.

"Pump away! Has it gone? Are you perfectly sure? Two hundred and thirty! That's a lot. We must get it down a bit. Now let out the air. Why, my dear boy, don't look like that! You're as white as a sheet! You'll never make a doctor," he teased him, "if you think who your patients are. It mustn't matter a button to you who these arteries belong to. All you have to think of is the pressure of blood inside 'em. I'm not a man; I'm a case. Just remember that!"

Jim smiled wanly. The old man's courage put him to shame.

"My only real anxiety," the doctor was saying, "is to be able to keep on the practice till you've got your degree. I shall do it, never fear!" he said, with a flash of the old determination. "But don't let us talk any more of such gloomy things, my dear boy. Tell me all about your work in London; that's much more interesting. It's curious to think that forty-seven years ago I was doing exactly what you're doing now at St. Luke's. Half a century—think of it! More than two-thirds of a lifetime! Palmerston had just died, and Gladstone was leader of the House of Commons. Think of it! Yet it seems just like yesterday; that's the curious thing. The further you get away from it, the nearer it seems. When I listen to you it's like living my life all over again. That's the privilege of having a grandson, to remember your youth, step by step—though we didn't have to learn half as much as you do in those days, mind you!"

It seemed like a deliberate irony on the part of Fate that never, until now, had Jim realized the innocent sweetness of the old man's disposition. During those few weeks Jim and he were always together. After breakfast Jim helped him with the routine of surgery-work. "The more you get it under your skin," the old man said, "the easier it'll come to you later. That's where the old system of apprenticeship was good." As soon as "surgery" was over they drove out on the morning round, Jim taking the reins. The doctor chatted as they went. Sitting huddled at Jim's side, his frail figure almost lost in the muffling overcoat, the old man seemed keener and more serene than ever before. It was as though the disease, which made his sunken eyes so blue and bright, had also clarified their vision, so that nothing escaped them. There was a quality of "feyness" in all their observations, as if, realizing the term that was set to his earthly delights, he were determined to drain the cup of life to its dregs. And Jim, moved with awe and pity, played up to his gallantry. "When Spring comes . . ." the doctor would say: and the words stabbed Jim's heart, as there came into his mind, from God knows where, a melancholy line of poetry—*Look thy last on all things lovely!*

At other times the doctor would speak, in confidence, of the private history of families whom he attended, revealing incredible secrets of passion and violence, of madness and inherited taints, that smouldered, unguessed, beneath the placid surface of rustic life, till it seemed to Jim that this smiling countryside was nothing but a scene set for human tragedy. "These people," the doctor told him, "will some day be your patients. It's as well that you should know all about the insides of their lives. Those are far more important, in the end, than the insides of their bodies which you'll learn about at St. Luke's. A doctor's most useful of all as a father confessor. My medicine and my surgery are both of them quite out of date; but I know my people, and that is what really matters. All this'll be useful to you when you take my place."

Jim listened, aware of the falseness of his own position, knowing that he was acquiring these confidences under cover of a pious fraud, affecting a vivid interest in everything medical—not only in these sombre family histories but in the mechanical details of practice: the compounding of tinctures and infusions and gummy emulsions, the rolling of pills, the mixing of ointments, the dispensing and wrapping of medicines and the keeping of books. He threw himself into this life so thoroughly that the old man rejoiced, imagining that Jim felt already the glow of a vocation as clear as his own. And what did the falseness matter, Jim thought, as long as this fond illusion brightened his days?

At times Dr. Weston sat huddled in the silence of intimate thought with his eyes half closed. Jim saw him as an old, blind dog, that lies dreaming before the fire. Of what did he dream? Of those old political battles, when Gladstone, his idol, sat fierily facing the swarthy Disraeli? Of those soft Spring days in the Marches when his passionate youth had swept that cold woman off her feet? Of great runs with the Thorpe, the Belvoir, the Quorn, the Cottesmore? Of giants like Fred Burnaby or Bay Middleton, who had ridden beside him?

But, more often, it was the future—the future which he would never see—that engaged him. One day, when their course was apparently set for Essendine, the old man abruptly changed his direction.

"Drive straight on to Melton," he said. "I want to see Withers, the lawyer. We'll look in at Essendine on the way home. I'm going to make one or two small alterations to my will," he explained, "and I'd rather that your grandmother didn't know of this visit. It would put all kinds of alarming ideas into her head."

Jim walked the horse up and down the main street of Melton in the cold for the best part of an hour. When the doctor emerged he was tired, but visibly lighter in spirit. Withers, the lawyer, came to the door with him, bareheaded. His hair, unevenly grey, with the darker stripes, made his narrow head look like a badger's.

"That's a good job done, anyway," the doctor declared as they drove away. "I've got several small things off my mind, Jim. I'd a feeling," he confessed, "that I hadn't treated your mother quite fairly. We felt strongly at the time—or rather your grandmother did—but if her marriage with your father was an unhappy one, it wasn't entirely her fault. Besides that I've settled a small annuity on Eliza, though I imagine she'll stay with your grandmother as long as she can. When you take on the practice you'll naturally live at The Grange with her, till you find a wife for yourself; but that's looking far ahead. Your Aunt Margaret and Lucy will be settled long before then."

"Do you think this affair with Mr. Holly is serious?" Jim asked.

"Your grandmother says so."

"I don't like Holly."

"Neither do I. He's not much of a man; I don't fancy Mohun either. But don't tell your grandmother I said so!"

"Don't you think . . ." Jim began.

"No, I don't, my dear boy. There's one thing I've learnt in this life, Jim, by bitter experience, and that is never to interfere in matters of that kind."

He relapsed into somnolent silence, huddled in his overcoat, lulled by the regular rhythm of the old mare's hoofs, while Jim's thoughts, now left to themselves, returned to Lucy and Mr. Holly. He had always hoped that Julian's interest in her was more than a transient fancy—if only as an assurance that their schoolboy friendship would continue. Was Julian still his friend? Even that seemed doubtful. Since Julian went up to New College he had heard no word of him. A chilling comparison presented itself between Julian's affair with Lucy and his own with Cynthia. Were both of them no more than flowers that had bloomed in the warm midsummer dusk, condemned to wilt and wither at the first touch of frost?

The mare gave a sudden start and pricked her ears.

"What the devil's the matter with you, you fool?" Jim growled at her. At that instant, as though stabbed by the same mysterious influence as the mare, the doctor awoke.

"Hello!" he said. "Hounds! Do you hear?"

It was true. As they breasted a rise, there came down the wind a burst of familiar music. They were running from Ranksborough Gorse and pointing for Essendine. A lovely sight, Jim thought, as they raced downhill, a dapple of moving white on the frost-brown slope, the pink of the huntsmen leading the field behind, and ahead—far ahead—a brown, creeping speck. Jim touched up the mare to turn her.

"Hold hard!" said the doctor. His voice had the old, firm, ringing tones. The dog that lay dreaming in front of the fire was now wide-awake. His body stiffened to attention; his keen eyes shone. "Hold hard, Jim," he said. "Where's the wind? He'll bear left-handed for Leesby. If you turn we shall probably head him. Look, what did I say!"

The brown speck, invisible to the hunt, appeared to falter; then swept in a wide curve toward them and was lost in the greater brown of a ditch.

"There! What did I say?" the doctor demanded triumphantly. "The old horse smelleth the battle, afar off." He stood up in the trap, his eyes devouring the distance. "My God, Jim, they've checked! It's a damnable day. No scent with him. They're beaten. They've lost their fox!"

So it seemed; for the straggling field was now clustered or scattered on the edge of the ditch where the brown speck had disappeared. For a moment only. Suddenly the quiescent mass came to life again. It turned, with one mind, left-handed again, and spread out as before, racing wildly toward the rise where the dog-cart stood.

"Change over, Jim. Give me the reins. Hurry up!" the doctor cried. Jim changed his position quickly. The old man was possessed. "What did I tell you?" he laughed. "I've known this happen a hundred times. He'll run on like hell for Leesby flats, but they'll soon get on terms with him. It's lucky we're up here. There's some heavy going, below! Be ready for that gate on the right. Quick! Now!"

Jim slung himself down; but before the gate had slammed back, the doctor was off again. Flushed and breathless, Jim jumped for the step and hauled himself up.

"The mare knows what she's after. Just look at her!" the doctor laughed. "Good old girl!" He gave her her head, and the roan leapt forward. The old man knew his line. Already they had abandoned the road. The trap swayed like a ship at sea over billows of land, jolting over humps and tussocks, subsiding, with a sickening motion, into troughs that marked the strips of the old commonfields. At moments it seemed as if they were going to capsize. The old man cared for nothing. "Hold on tight, Jim! Lord, that was a bump!" He laughed wildly. "There's a gate in the corner. I'm not going to wait for you. Here you are!"

Jim flung the gate open. This time he only regained his seat by a sheer feat of gymnastics.

"All right, boy?" the doctor smiled. The field was a huge one, a great bow of bistre turf, unridged and smooth-surfaced. The old man gave the mare her head. She shot on at a hand-gallop—upward, upward, with turf-clods and foam-flecks flying and the wind tearing by. It was superb. Enthralled as he was with the splendour of the chase, Jim couldn't help seeing his grandfather—erect, flaming, triumphant, utterly careless of danger, as a white-bearded druid whirled in a chariot-charge. The angel of death no longer shadowed his face. That dark shape was forgotten. He glowed with a frenzy of life, transported, transfigured, like a hero happily riding to death and glory.

With a lurch and a stumble they breasted the crown of the field. Beneath them, serenely empty, lay the level expanse of the Leesby flats, a wide, sere pastureland, broken by dark patches of plough, black coppices, steely dykes, the spire of Leesby church and its naked elms wreathed in smoke from the village chimneys. A flight of rooks streamed like flies in the grey beneath them. The air was so still that Jim heard their frightened cawing. It was the noise of the hunt that had scared them from their winter feeding.

"Look at them," the doctor cried. "That means hounds are running!"

They were running like smoke, snow-white on the purple fallows. Heavy going impeded the field; they seemed stuck in the plough; they floundered, like flies on a saucer of jam.

"Ha! We've got the pull on them there, poor devils!" The doctor laughed as they swerved again to the left. "We can strike the lane here. I only hope to God Cowen's keeper has stopped that drain in Curate's wood. You may bet your shirt he's pointing for that, the old devil! Gate, Jim! Quickly!"

In the lane, with dead branches of hazel sweeping their faces, the mare broke to a gallop again; a deep rut nearly unshipped them. "If the damned spring's gone we can't help it," the doctor muttered. A near burst of music reached them. "They're out in the open!" he cried. "Go on, my beauties!"

As he spoke the trap wheeled round a corner with blind precipitance. Jim was suddenly aware of a farm-cart loaded with swedes turning into the lane. The doctor, with incredible strength and swiftness of reaction, pulled the mare to the right and brought her up on her haunches and into the hedge. A stupid-faced carter, with red whiskers, stared at them blankly. Then his silly face broke into a smile.

"By gum, doctor," he drawled. "That there was a pretty near shave, weren't it? Never guessed it was you."

"You double-dyed fool!" the doctor roared, "take your damned horse out of the way. Pull in, damn you!" he shouted. "I don't want to stay here all day!"

They were off again, leaving the carter dumbfounded behind them.

"A pretty near shave! I should think it was!" Jim laughed to himself.

"Gate, Jim!"

Another field widened in front of them.

"By Jove, there he is! Here they come! And, by God, Jim—we're in at the death!"

A bedraggled, mud-coloured shape, an old dog-fox, his brush like a rat's tail, was feebly clambering up the steep clay face of a bank. He clutched at the crumbling earth with his claws; his strength failed him; he fell; then turned, with his mouth wide open, his long tongue lolling, staring, with fear in his yellow eyes, at the pitiless stampede of death behind him. A great, deep-chested hound led the van; four others followed closely. In the red, crumbling clay of the bank they rolled him over.

"The run of my life! Throw that rug over the mare!" the doctor was saying. He jumped down from the box, his whip in his hand, as a big-boned bay topped the last hedge with a mighty thud, and the master, his sweating face as red as his coat, dismounted and staggered toward them, plunging into the midst of the hounds, blaspheming and cursing. He panted and smiled as he turned to the doctor.

"Why, Weston, it's you, is it? What the hell are *you* doing here?"

The old man laughed. "First time out this season, master. A nice bit of cross-country work, eh? What do you think of it?" And he pointed to the dog-cart, mired to the axles, with the near springs broken.

"You old devil!" the master laughed.

Jim would never forget, he thought, the thin wail of the horn that day, so plaintively echoing along the black coppice edge. "The mort," he thought. The word had a mournful sound.

"I'm afraid we shall have to cut out Essendine this morning," the doctor told him. "It doesn't much matter. There's nothing serious there. You'd better take the reins now. Keep her moving gently; the old mare mustn't get chilled. That's her last hunt, Jim, and I reckon it's mine as well. But I've nowt to complain of, as they say," he added cheerfully. "Poor old Whyte Melville! He knew what I'm feeling now." In his steady voice he chanted the foxhunter's *Nunc Dimittis:*

"I have lived my life—I am nearly done;
I have played the game all round;
But I freely admit that the best of the fun
I owe it to horse and hound."

It wasn't good poetry, Jim thought; but, none the less, it brought tears into his eyes.

"It's cold, Jim," the old man said, as he wrapped his thick frieze overcoat over his chest. "Don't tell your grandmother about this, or there'll be the devil to pay."

He shivered. Jim realized that the escapade had been dangerous for a man in his condition. He was thankful, next morning, to see that the doctor appeared to be none the worse for it. That day was the last of his holiday. On the morrow Rupert Mohun was due to reach Thorpe. He would stay at The Grange and occupy the room that Jim vacated until the day of the wedding, which had been fixed for the middle of February. Mrs. Weston made it plain that it would have been more convenient for her if Jim had left a day earlier. The bedroom, which was good enough for him, would need putting in order for Mohun. So, feeling himself in the way, he escaped, as soon as the morning round was over, and rode to Cold Orton to say good-bye to the Malthuses, whom, his conscience told him, he had neglected during his stay at Thorpe.

The Vicarage was as full of serenity as The Grange was disturbed. Paul would soon be ordained, the girls told him; Christopher doing quite splendidly at Camborne; while Mark, in South Africa, looked like outstripping them all. How happy he and Catherine would be together! Mr. Malthus, more shabby than ever, took Jim aside. "Your grandfather has told me," he said, "how happy he feels about you. You must be thankful yourself, Jim, that you decided to fall in with his wishes and go to London. We often think of you and talk about you here at Cold Orton. Won't you stay and have tea with us?"

Jim excused himself. He had promised, he said, to have tea with Miss Minnet.

At Rose Cottage Miss Minnet awaited his visit eagerly. A sweet, cottagey smell, like that of old-fashioned gardens, pervaded her cosy drawing-room. A diminutive, red-cheeked maid carried in the Sheffield-plate tea-tray, which her mistress only used when she had company.

"Hello, what's happened to Edith?" Jim asked.

"She has gone," Miss Minnet answered, her pale cheeks blushing.

"Has she married?"

Miss Minnet sighed. "No, she has not married."

The subject was not only painful but indelicate. Miss Minnet tactfully changed it. "I want you to tell me all about your dear mother," she said. And since, at that moment, this topic was equally painful to Jim, they didn't get very much further, and the visit ended with the sense of awkwardness with which it had begun.

As he left Rose Cottage in the dusk Jim found himself face to face with Mrs. Jewell, whom so far, during his holiday, he had managed to avoid.

"Well, what are you doing here?" she asked dictatorially, as though she had caught him emerging from a house of ill-fame. "Are you going straight home?"

Jim couldn't deny it. "In that case," she said, "I'll walk with you. Poor Janet Essendine told me she had seen you in London." (Ever since the general election Mrs. Jewell persisted in calling the Essendines "poor.") "I heard from her this morning. She and Cynthia are leaving London for Cannes to-morrow."

Another blow! Jim took it as well as he could. How long were they likely to stay on the Riviera? he asked.

"Oh, heaven only knows," Mrs. Jewell answered off-handedly. "If I hadn't my duties to attend to, I shouldn't dream of returning to London before May. Have you seen your mother lately?" she asked abruptly.

"No. She isn't in London now."

"Not in London? Really? Where *is* she?"

The question was so sharp that Jim resented it. What business of Mrs. Jewell's was it, anyway? He was silent.

"I have a particular reason for asking you this," Mrs. Jewell said.

"I'm afraid I don't know," Jim answered, almost truthfully. By this time they had reached the door of The Grange. He held out his hand to wish her good-bye.

"Oh, no," Mrs. Jewell said. "I'm coming in. I want to see your grandmother at once," she added importantly; and she marched in, ahead of Jim, to the dining-room door.

Although tea had been cleared away, Mrs. Weston still sat at the head of the table. There was an air of determined, calm satisfaction on her face; in a few more weeks Margaret's marriage, for which she had worked so hard, would have been accomplished. In the light of this achievement she could afford to be more than usually polite to her ancient enemy.

"Mrs. Jewell!" she said. "Why, what a delightful surprise! Margaret, ring for some tea, darling. Won't you sit down?" she enquired.

"No, thank you. I prefer to stand," Mrs. Jewell answered grimly. "I want to know about this."

With a dramatic gesture she produced from the depths of her sealskin coat a folded newspaper, and flourished it in Mrs. Weston's face. Jim's grandmother winced slightly at this violence. "The *Morning Post?*" she asked in her cold, clear voice. "We don't take in a London paper, Mrs. Jewell."

"Well, I think this may interest you," said Mrs. Jewell triumphantly. She began to read with a savage accentuation: *"Among the most notable suits that are down for trial during the Hilary Session of the Divorce Court is the undefended petition of Redlake, G. versus Redlake, E. and Fosdyke. Mr. George Redlake is the well-known novelist.* Perhaps you would prefer to read the paragraph yourself," she said, as she folded the paper and handed it to Mrs. Weston.

Mrs. Weston had listened without the least sign of emotion on her pale impressive face. Only at the sound of two words—"Divorce" and, later, "Redlake"—Jim had seen her blink as though a blow had been aimed at her eyes. She mastered her feelings quickly.

"Yes," she said in her level voice, "I should much have preferred to read the paragraph myself, Mrs. Jewell. Good evening."

She rose, with a slight, an almost imperceptible bow, and stood waiting for her visitor to go.

"Will you show Mrs. Jewell out, Margaret darling?"

She smiled as she spoke. In all his life Jim had never seen a smile so terrible.

When Margaret and Mrs. Jewell had gone she still stood there erect, quite motionless, more than ever resembling a figure in porcelain. In the next room a piano began to tinkle; the voice of Mr. Holly, whose presence Jim had not suspected, was raised in a tremulous tenor to Lucy's accompaniment. *"I shot an arrow into the air,"* Mr. Holly declaimed. *"It fell to earth I know not where,"* he continued.

Aunt Margaret re-entered the room, more flustered than usual, her face like a peony, her big eyes slopping tears.

"Oh, mother!" she cried. "Oh, mother!"

"I found it again in the heart of a friend," Mr. Holly lusciously ended.

"Sit down, Margaret!" her mother commanded her.

Then, suddenly, she turned on Jim. She spoke as fiercely as though he were the only person responsible.

"What do you know about this? Don't lie to me, Jim! I forbid you to lie to me!"

Jim had no intention of lying, he said. He knew nothing about it.

"I refuse to believe you. You're just as deceitful as your mother. Deceitful? That's not the word. This is wickedness . . . wickedness. Have you heard that name—what is it, Margaret?—Fosdyke, before?"

"My mother was Dr. Fosdyke's secretary," Jim admitted.

"A doctor? That makes it worse. This will kill your grandfather. Have you ever seen this man? Who is he? Where does he live? Is he married?"

The questions came out like a staccato of machine-gun fire. "In Italy? And is she there too? Why didn't you tell me? It's my belief you know a great deal more than you care to confess. It was your duty to tell me! Undefended! She admits her guilt, her horrible wickedness. If only she had asked our advice! But she's brazen, shameless! Stop crying, Margaret!" she snapped, then stood glaring at Jim. "This thing must be stopped," she said. "Even if I have to see your father myself, this thing must be stopped."

"I don't think you'll do much good by seeing father," Jim put in mildly. "After all, they've been separated for years; they don't live together. I don't like Dr. Fosdyke much; but if she thinks she'll be happy with him . . ."

"Be happy? In sin? You don't know what you're talking about!"

"I know that if I were in her place I shouldn't consider father. He's looked after himself long enough. She owes nothing to *him.*"

Mrs. Weston's whole body froze. "She owes nothing to *him!*" she repeated icily. "You'll be saying next she owes nothing to the God who made her or the mother that bore her! You uphold her, do you? That's enough! Get out of my sight!" She stepped forward: "Get out of my sight!" she almost screamed.

Jim retreated before her. Her dead eyes blazed as if she were mad; her hands were outstretched like talons to tear at his face. "Go to her, and stay there!" she cried. "Get out of this house!" she shrieked.

Jim smiled; he didn't even know he was smiling; but the sight of this smile so maddened her that she tripped in the fold of carpet and would have fallen if he hadn't caught her. She wrenched herself away from him; but the physical shock had sobered her. She spoke, or panted, in a voice that he had never heard:

"Your mother has ruined us, ruined us all," she said. "The disgrace to the family. Margaret's future . . . Lucy's! Do you think that fine men like Rupert Mohun and Mr. Holly can possibly enter a family that has been disgraced? Do you think that I or your grandfather can ever hold up our heads again? And you, you approve it—approve it!" She staggered to her chair and collapsed in it. She waved her arm feebly. "Now go . . . get out of my sight!"

As Jim turned to the door—there was nothing else to be done—Mr. Holly's rich tenor embarked in another romantic flight.

"Lay by my side a bunch of purple heathah," Mr. Holly warbled.

"Stop crying, Margaret! Go and fetch your father," Mrs. Weston commanded.

It was later on the same evening that a telegram arrived announcing Rupert Mohun's death. He had broken his neck out hunting with the Bramham Moor.

V. *Sommernacht*

IT WAS doubtless, as Mrs. Jewell confidently averred, a Judgment. The Almighty, who evidently regarded the Redlake divorce much more seriously than Jim, had deliberately broken poor Captain Mohun's neck just to show how He felt about it. Mrs. Jewell's own feelings in the matter were somewhat mixed. Of course she accepted the divine reprisal with Christian submissiveness; it was thoroughly in keeping with the nature of God as expounded by her husband, and a timely reminder to Mrs. Weston of the futility of her social pretensions. On the other hand, this affair was a reflection on the morals of the district, coming, as it did, on the top of another unsavoury *cause celèbre* involving two prominent members of the "hunting set." She was thankful to know that neither of them was typical of domestic life in High Leicestershire, and, for this reason, lost no opportunity of deploring the Redlake divorce wherever she went and making quite sure that everyone in the district knew all about Mrs. Weston's discomfiture as soon as possible. She even arranged that her husband should point the moral by preaching next Sunday, not, of course, on the text of the woman taken in adultery, but on the miserable fate of Herod, who was deservedly eaten by worms for that offence.

That Sunday morning, unfortunately for Mrs. Jewell, the Westons' pew was empty, so that she missed the pleasure of seeing her rival blench beneath Mr. Jewell's denunciation, which was lost on the whole congregation, probably, with the exception of Miss Minnet, who trembled on her organstool as she thought of her poor dear Elizabeth, and thanked heaven that, sinful as she was, she had never been tempted to commit adultery herself. Not only did Mrs. Weston evade the just humiliation which had been planned for her by neglecting to go to church; it was more than a week before she emerged, in deep mourning, from the doors of The Grange, accompanied by Margaret, who had hurried up North and returned from the burial of her hopes. It was Mrs. Jewell's good fortune to meet them at the moment when they stepped out into the village street, and to express, by a reserved salute, her properly mingled sentiments of triumph, scorn and commiseration. A shock awaited her. For the first time in thirty years Mrs. Weston cut her dead.

"If only," Mrs. Jewell reflected, "I had thought of cutting her first!" She stalked home in cold fury. "So that's what you get," she told her husband, "as a reward for behaving like a Christian! There is only one thing to be done, Albert," she declared dogmatically. "I insist on your changing our doctor and making the Essendines and all our nice friends do the same. After all, Dr. Weston's a Liberal; so what can you expect? You cannot touch pitch," she added, "and not be defiled."

Mr. Jewell's face grew mulishly obstinate; he mumbled and ran his fingers through his long beard. Dr. Weston, he was understood to say, was the only man living who understood his liver.

"Your liver!" Mrs. Jewell answered contemptuously. "I don't even believe that you've got one. Your liver's a piece of sheer imagination and a constant expense."

The supreme satisfaction she had felt when she cut Mrs. Jewell gave Jim's grandmother the stimulus she required to set up her spirits. What had troubled her was not so much the cause of their social disaster, the Redlake divorce itself, as its immediate effect, Rupert Mohun's death, and its possible consequences in prejudicing Lucy's chances with Mr. Holly. Mr. Holly, true gentleman that he was, seemed disposed to be charitable; but Margaret's marriage, alas, was another kettle of fish, upset at the precise moment when it had come to the boil. However, as Ernest had said, Mrs. Weston was not easily beaten. Having polished off Mrs. Jewell, once and for all, with that one superb snub, the old lady set herself courageously to consolidate her position. There were better fish in the sea than poor Rupert Mohun. Patient angler that she was, she repaired her tackle, refurnished her hook with its somewhat damaged bait, and hoped for better luck next time.

Though outwardly as cold as ever, her heart was still seething with bitterness. Mr. Withers, the Melton solicitor, whom she consulted at once, had convinced her that there was little chance of aborting George Redlake's petition. Jim's mother and the co-respondent had made that hopeless by declining to defend it. In this frustration Mrs. Weston concentrated all the force of her hatred on her daughter and, through her, on Jim. It was by a threat of divorce on her side, eleven years ago, that Elizabeth had blackmailed them into keeping the boy at Thorpe and, finally, adopting him. By her scandalous breach of that pact she had forfeited Jim's right to further protection. The practice? Why, that was a piece of valuable property that could easily be sold. There were plenty of young doctors with capital to spare who would be only too pleased to buy it when the doctor retired. When, transported with rage, she had told Jim to get out of her sight, she had meant what she said. She had never liked him, had only accepted him to humour her husband and to avoid the scandal that Elizabeth had held at her head like a loaded pistol. Her God, like Mr. Jewell's, was one who justly visited the sins of the mothers upon the children; and poor Dr. Weston, as Jim's only defender, found himself in for a harassing time.

"I told you at the time, John," the old lady affirmed, "that it was a mistake to promise too much. The boy has no heart. His callousness about the whole shameful affair is shocking. He's sly—by his own confession he's actually met this man Fosdyke. It's my belief that he knew all along what was happening. He showed no surprise. Well, what can you expect, after all, with such a man for a father and such a mother? The bad blood will tell! He's deceived us, and it's our bounden duty to wash our hands of him!"

Dr. Weston sighed. He pressed his thin hands backward on either side of the wrinkled scalp, as though, by so doing, he could remove the headache that now hung about him whenever the weather was cold. He faded away out of earshot into his surgery. These attacks of hysteria didn't make life any easier. Let her talk, let her talk! It made no difference to him. But he missed Jim sadly. The boy had been a real help. "He'll be back at Easter," he thought.

In London they regard such things differently. The news of George Redlake's petition passed almost unnoticed. Among his present acquaintances there were few who even knew that he was married, and nobody conceived it a public duty to apportion the blame. The prime mover in the matter, in point of fact, had been neither George Redlake himself, nor any other living person, but the late Senator Sheldon Wadsworth Parrot of Pennsylvania, who directed the proceedings, by proxy, through the agency of a lady, in touch with the other world, who wrote automatically in a flat in Maida Vale. Having crossed to Europe and seen "that man," according to the senator's commands, Mrs. Parrot, whose movements were controlled from "the other side," like those of a target-ship navigated by wireless, had settled at Claridge's, placidly waiting for further directions. When they came, they were brief and explicit. The senator, though exceptionally eloquent during his life at Harrisburg, had acquired, in heaven, a strict economy of words. He said: *Marry that man!* He said it again and again.

Mrs. Parrot broke the news to George Redlake with virginal modesty. It seemed more like Fate than ever, she said; a genuine illustration of the saying that marriages were made in heaven. She herself had no say in the matter. It was just that, she said, which made it so wonderful. It was such a relief to feel that here, in London, she had the benefit of that celestial guidance; to be assured, by the senator himself, that neither she nor her few little dollars ran any risk. "*They* know, George," she said.

There was, as George Redlake explained, a certain technical obstacle to the fulfilment of the senator's wishes . . . a wife, in short. He himself, of course, was a man of letters and not constrained by conventional standards of morality. He admitted no impediments to the marriage—or, indeed, the irregular relationship of true minds. If Louisa were willing to flout convention and throw in her lot with his . . . George Redlake became excited, and went very red in the neck.

Mrs. Parrot shook her head gently. Perhaps, who knew—in other circumstances . . . ? But the senator, alas, was a Quaker, and literal rather than literary; and here he was adamant. The word which he had used, and used repeatedly, was *marry*. That could only mean one thing: marriage.

"But surely," Mrs. Parrot, who was a child in such matters, pleaded ingenuously, "there are such things in Europe as divorce and private enquiry bureaus? Are they very expensive on this side? I'm sure that the senator would approve any reasonable expenditure."

She sighed; on that sigh the senator's few little dollars seemed drifting away like smoke.

"I'll see what can be done," George Redlake answered her grimly. "In the meantime I think you had better not come here alone."

Three weeks later he filed his petition; and God, out of spite, according to Mrs. Jewell, promptly broke Rupert Mohun's neck.

But Jim knew nothing of all this. Although his upbringing at Thorpe had accustomed him to thinking of divorce as a shameful social catastrophe, he couldn't, in the present state of his feeling toward George Redlake, help defending his mother—the more so when he heard the terms in which Mrs. Weston spoke of her. If there were to be any taking of sides in the matter, he knew he must be on hers. He only felt a little hurt that she hadn't warned him of what was coming in her letter from Italy; but even that soreness was removed when, a few days later, he received another which made the position clear. She told him that she and Dr. Fosdyke had loved each other for years; if Jim only knew how gentle and good Dr. Fosdyke was, he would realize why. Even now (she knew Jim would believe her) they were actually no more than friends. They had both of them decided, long ago, that this must be so. Of course, if she had wished to, she could easily have divorced George Redlake. She had held her hand, not for any reasons of sentiment, but simply because her promise not to do so had been made the condition of Jim's reception at Thorpe, and she would not secure her own happiness at the expense of his. When Dr. Fosdyke fell desperately ill she had insisted on going with him to Italy—as a nurse, not as a mistress, and Jim's father's petition had taken them both by surprise. She could have defended the case—with considerable difficulty, of course, for appearances were against them—and raked up a number of infidelities on George Redlake's side; but, everything considered, she and her friend had decided not to do so. If George Redlake wanted to marry, as she supposed he did, she had no feelings against it. Neither she nor Dr. Fosdyke was young, and life was so short. If George Redlake chose to throw them into each other's arms, she could not complain. She hoped Jim would forgive her; and, whether he did or no, she was always his loving mother. "I should feel much happier if you would write to me, darling," she said.

Jim wrote by return. There were tears in his eyes as he wrote. It touched him to think that his mother had sacrificed so many years of happiness for his sake. At that distance she seemed to him small and tender and quite intolerably pathetic. He himself had behaved disgracefully to her; the least he could do in the future was to make amends. He felt happier when he had written.

The events of the last few months had affected him deeply. The despair that had followed his raptures—Cynthia was at Cannes, with her mother, the papers said, but she never answered the letters he wrote to her; the sudden decay of his friendship with Julian; the changed atmosphere of Thorpe, now shadowed by his grandfather's mortal illness; his mother's divorce; the frenzy with which Mrs. Weston had unmasked her feelings toward him; his acquaintance at St. Luke's and in the Lupus Street lodgings with so many new and undreamed of aspects of existence: all these had, in various ways, changed the values of life as he saw it—unless it were he who had changed.

Even his own lighthearted ambitions and aspirations had lost their romantic colouring. Life, as Miss Minnet's favourite poet declared, was real, life was becoming earnest. It was time to get down to reality.

If only for his grandfather's sake, he religiously attached himself to the new term's work at St. Luke's. He even, to his amazement, found friends among those fellow-students whom his schoolboy snobbishness had formerly rejected. They were not in the least like Julian, the Essendines, or George Redlake; but, compared with these, or even with himself, they had a three-dimensional solidity which he couldn't help respecting. At Lupus Street he made humble overtures to renew his friendship with Starling; and Starling, to his surprise, accepted them as though nothing had happened.

In Jim's absence, by an enormous effort of concentration, Starling had finished his book. The publisher was enthusiastic about it; the manuscript had gone to press. A *succès d'estime* was certain; if the libraries would only ban it there were even greater hopes of a *succès de scandale*. Starling himself looked paler, more agonized than ever; he was limp, devastated, mildly complacent, like a woman who has had a shattering time with a baby and surveys the world blandly with weak, convalescent eyes. As to the baby itself he was characteristically scornful.

"It's a hell of a mess," he declared, "when I look at the stuff, it beats me to think however I could have written such tripe. Still, it's stop-press tripe; what's more, I've emptied the whole damn pepper-pot into it, and solemn-faced boobs of critics'll gulp it down and choke their heads off and pretend that they like it, because they want people to think that nothing can shock 'em. There's not one in twenty that'll know that I'm pulling their elegant legs. And what does it matter, anyway? I've stung that Jew Slessinger for seventy-five quid; which means I can live like a lord—*you* know all about them!—for six months, and send a bit home. And *then*, Redlake my boy, I'm going to write a real book. They can take it or leave it! No nonsense next time, I warn you!"

He laughed gnomeishly. This affected contempt for what he had done was merely a symptom, as Jim guessed, of his pride in it. Yet, in this mood of release and relaxation, his disposition revealed itself as curiously childlike and sweet. The acrid, tempestuous zealot, was still, in fact, a diffident little provincial, incredulously thrilled at the fact that words from his pen would actually be printed and bound and circulated and discussed in the "stucco cemetery" of Mayfair. It astonished Jim when, one evening, Starling referred to the poems which had fulminated the explosion that he wished to forget.

"By the way," he said, "what have you done with that stuff of yours?"

"Nothing, naturally," Jim told him. "I gathered that you thought it was rotten."

"Well, all modern poetry is. Your stuff's not much worse than the rest. If it were better nobody would print it; so why not try? I know the editor of the *London Criterion*. They don't pay much; but they'd probably print it, if that would be any good to you. I'll write you a letter to him if you like."

Jim accepted the olive-branch shyly, and posted his poems with a letter from Starling so rude that it seemed to make their rejection certain. A few weeks later the editor replied, enclosing proofs. In his postscript Jim read the familiar words: *"Are you any relation . . . ?"*

"Well, what did I tell you?" said Starling, using the acceptance as a text on which to hang a sermon on the baseness of contemporary taste.

Jim was over the sky with delight and pride. Print gave to his poems a precision of form that they had lacked in manuscript. On the day when the *London Criterion* appeared he posted a copy to

Cynthia at Essendine House. Whether the butler had condescended to forward it he could not guess, for Cynthia made no reply; but, within a week, he received a short note, re-directed by Julian, from Marcus Hinton, inviting him to dinner at Berkeley Square on the following Friday. *"I have read your poems and liked them,"* the banker said. *"Do come if you can; but don't answer."*

It was curious to enter the confidential silence of the Hintons' town-house without Julian. As Page, the du Maurier butler, showed him into the library Jim was conscious of the richness and variety of the life he had led since last he entered it. Here nothing had changed. The room wore an air as discreet and polished as ever. Its very silence might never have been disturbed since he left it by any sound louder than Marcus Hinton's quiet voice. The calm personality of its owner still transpired it. His possessions imposed upon it the influence of their dreamlike, immemorial beauty.

It was with a sudden gasp of awe and of piercing pleasure that Jim found himself standing once more before the Nolan vase—that slender, imperishable water-flower reflected still in its pool of black marble. He had seen such scant beauty of late. In the world of Lupus Street he had almost forgotten that such an emotion as that which he now felt existed. Was it really as beautiful as this? he asked himself; was such loveliness possible? The Oread, Echo, stood suspended in her bloom of onyx. Once more, but more cruelly now, her resemblance to Cynthia stabbed him. *Bold lover, never, never. . . .*

"Ah, I see that you're faithful to your old love, Jim!"

Marcus Hinton was speaking. He had stolen into the room like a quiet mole in his black velvet jacket; his white fingers touched Jim's shoulders; they shook hands.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "it was your poem about my little nymph that particularly appealed to me. Of course, it's been done before," he smiled, "but your verses were charming. You love her, don't you? Well, so do I; and that's a great bond between us. When two men love the same woman they generally behave like wild beasts; when they love things like *this* . . ." He paused. "Come along, we'll have dinner. You'll excuse me if I don't eat much? You won't mind me watching you? What d'you drink, by the way. I remember, you liked that hock. The *Steinberg Auslese*, Page."

The dinner, as usual, was exquisitely planned; the cooking admirable. Marcus Hinton ate practically nothing, sipping a glass of Vichy. They began to talk about Julian. He seemed, Marcus Hinton said, to be popular at Oxford. He supposed Jim kept up with him? No? That seemed rather a pity. He was coming to town next week for some dance or other, Jim ought to telephone.

"And your father?" he asked. "I haven't seen him for a long time. It was curious, your meeting here, wasn't it? I suppose, now that you're living in London, you often see him?"

"I'm not very keen on my father," Jim told him frankly.

"Ah yes, so I gathered. Besides that there's some little domestic . . . confusion, isn't there? Well, novelists will be novelists! But, even if you don't get on," he continued, "your verses show that you've inherited some of his talent. What are you going to do about it?"

Jim said he was studying medicine.

"Ah . . . I see you don't like it. Well, that doesn't matter. One kind of discipline is just as good as another. If you even find it completely intolerable and decide to abandon it, you'd better just write to me. We can talk things over and then, perhaps, I might find something else for you. I'm unorthodox in believing that men with an orderly sense of style are potentially good men of business. How old are you?"

"I shall be twenty next autumn, sir."

"Lucky fellow! A year younger than Julian. Let's have coffee in the library, with your Oread for company. I've several new pictures to show you."

As Jim sipped his coffee, a secretary entered with a sheaf of afternoon cables from Wall Street. Marcus Hinton excused himself to read and answer some of them, and Jim's imagination was stirred by the sight of this calm little man making firm, swift decisions, that rocked the markets of two worlds, with as little concern as though he were choosing a necktie. Such power, he thought, must surely be the highest expression of romantic achievement, now that dynasts no longer quartered the world with their swords. "If I were a great banker" he thought—and straightway his fancy was launched on a dizzy flight in which, as a pretty gesture on the day of his wedding, he presented his father-in-law, Lord Essendine, with the title-deeds of Thorpe Castle, released from mortgage the evening before.

"By the way," Marcus Hinton said, as the secretary left them, "I've been meaning to ask you: are you at all fond of music?"

"Enormously," Jim said. "Of course I don't know much about it apart from what Julian's taught me. At Winchester we were both mad on Wagner."

"Of course," Marcus Hinton said. "You're just the right age for him. My elderly tastes are rather severe, I'm afraid. I love the old music: Palestrina, Bach, Purcell, Scarlatti. I asked you that question because I happen to have a box at the Opera. I don't use it often myself; but when I ask other people I like to be sure that they don't accept out of politeness. When the season begins we'll fix something up together."

As Jim thanked him he saw, once again, in the banker's eyes that air of distraction which, on a former occasion, George Redlake had interpreted as a sign of polite dismissal. He rose to make his farewells, and the smile with which Hinton received them showed that he was appreciative of his young visitor's tact. "Come again soon," he said. "Any day at five. And if you write any more verses, bring them along with you. I should like to see them. I'll remember about the opera later on. Good-bye and good luck to you!"

This visit, even more than his lunch at Essendine House, made the lodgings in Lupus Street seem dreary. Miss Moger's interests, for all her kindness, were limited. Starling, who had begun his new book—No nonsense this time!—had stuck out his fretful porcupine quills again. Jim's mother had decided to remain in Italy with Dr. Fosdyke till the divorce proceedings were over. As for Cynthia, he had abandoned all hope of ever hearing from her, though he still watched the papers eagerly for news of her return. To ease his mind from the torment of thinking too much of her, Jim engrossed it successfully in his work at the hospital. It gave him a certain satisfaction to know that he was doing his duty by his grandfather, who occasionally encouraged him with cheerful letters from Thorpe. Though Jim's heart was not in his work, the end seemed less hopeless since Marcus Hinton had pointed a way of escape. At Easter he wrote to the doctor suggesting that he should stay in London for the holiday. He wanted, he explained, to make sure of passing his examination in June, though the hope of seeing Cynthia lay behind his suggestion. Between the lines of the old man's written approval Jim gathered that Mrs. Weston's malignant attitude was still unsoftened, and that he would be wiser to keep in the background.

So Spring came to London: in a rapid, miraculous lengthening of the fog-throttled daylight; in silvery April showers and bursts of mild sunshine; in a dance of daffodils tossing their downcast heads, and prim tulips that caught the showers in their glowing cups; in the chatter of mating sparrows, the crooning of pigeons, the whispers of lovers, walking with linked arms through their private heavens; in a soft air-borne restlessness that made old men, stamping the pavements, straighten their backs and smile at the children who dizzied about their feet in their mad Spring games and gambolled like lambs at sunset. Even in Lupus Street that piercing influence was to be felt: by the Major, standing on the steps with his new-waxed moustaches to wink at the girls; by Mrs. Pooley, whose voice rose through the area-gratings like that of a song-thrush in a cage; by Miss Moger, licking her lips over the prospect of the first green peas; by Mr. Cortachy breaking out into "Scots wha hae" as he slouched downstairs on his way to the museum; by little Miss Cowley, running for her life as though all the satyrs in Bloomsbury were after her. The only person in the house who resented it was Starling, locked in the agony of literary parturition and wishing to God, as he told Jim fiercely, that the world were not cursed by the distracting presence of women.

In the middle of May, Jim received an expensive telegram from Marcus Hinton.

Can you manage Meistersinger on Wednesday? he wrote. *Come straight to my box and we'll go home to supper afterwards. It's a pity to rush through dinner. Hope you can come.*

Jim reached Covent Garden five minutes before the overture. The banker was alone in the shadowy back of the box, as mole-like as ever.

"No more verses?" he asked. "I suppose that means that you're liking your work better? I'm glad that you managed to break away from it. When I say that I'm not so much thrilled by Wagner as you and Julian," he explained, "I always except the *Meistersinger.* I think I should choose it as my desert-island opera, because . . . well, I suppose it's because I am middle-aged. The romantic vintage is one that needs maturing. Tannhäuser's too raw, and Tristan's too heady for me; but this stuff's as mellow and rich as a fine old *Clos Vougeot.* If you want to look at the house don't take any notice of me. I prefer to listen without being disillusioned by watching the struggle between Eva's chest and her corsets."

It was the first time that Jim had ever surveyed Covent Garden except from the gallery. At close quarters the horse-shoe curve of the grand tier was much more startling. That evening its crowded boxes displayed a wealth of colour that shamed the tulip-beds of the parks in a profusion of bloom and bud, florid or delicate, from whose surface, glistening with jewels as with a sprinkle of rain, there arose a murmur like that of invisible bees. The hanging gardens of Babylon, Jim thought as he gazed at them. So much ease, such opulence, such a sense of secure social mastery shone from that parade that Jim wondered what gloomy souls like Starling were dreaming of when they proclaimed the imminent extinction of the ruling caste, already staggering beneath its burden of new taxation. Here, in that setting of tarnished gilt and shabby velvet, he seemed to see the flower of feudal magnificence in full bloom: an intrinsication of its pride, its wealth, its insolence, its sublime affectation of carelessness. What anonymous reserves of power and riches were here hoarded together? How many of these splendidly apparelled creatures, for whose delectation the world had been drained of its musical genius, were known by sight or repute to the hungry millions outside? If you wiped out the roll of the House of Lords to-morrow, Jim thought, the concentration of power would remain unaffected—while that little mole-like man in the shadow of the box behind him could repulse two continents in panic by a stroke of his pen!

From the pit of the orchestra faint whimperings of sound floated upward: the thin quaver of strings, violins and violas; reed-notes of oboes; white tremolos and roulades of flutes; mellow harp arpeggios and muffled drum-taps of tuning tympani. Subdued and discreet at first, like the tender waking notes of birds on a May morning, they swelled, at last, to dawn's full-throated chorus, filling that vast theatre with a rising wave of unorganized sound, drowning the murmur of bees on their hanging terraces, communicating a thrill of expectant excitement with their mingled vibrations.

"Do you see anybody interesting there?" Marcus Hinton softly enquired.

"Scarcely anyone that I know, except Lady Clun and Lord Clun, and—oh, yes, that must be Lady Elizabeth Purefoy. She looks so lovely I hardly recognized her."

"Poor Lady Elizabeth!" Marcus Hinton murmured. "She's reached the stage when a box at the opera suits her. Such is beauty!"

"The Essendines come here often, don't they?"

"Yes, their box is just opposite. George Essendine often sleeps there. He prefers Puccini. Lady Essendine's still abroad isn't she?"

"Yes, I think so," Jim said.

The Essendines' box yawned emptily, like the gap of a broken tooth, in the grand tier's fixed smile. As the lights went down he saw his father's tall figure foreshortened, moving slowly down the slope of the stalls in the wake of the ermine-cloaked form of Mrs. Parrot. It was the first time that Jim had seen George Redlake since the filing of his petition. The sight of that dignified unconcern sent the blood to his head. How he loathed and despised him! The huge cavern went black; in the hanging gardens only human faces shone ghostly like pale blooms in starlight. The Essendine box looked more vacant than ever. Of course! But he had hoped against hope. As the conductor crawled to his desk, a glow-worm spot in the darkness, the orchestra's quavers faltered and fell to silence. The conductor bowed perfunctorily, then tapped and raised his baton. With a blare of brass they crashed into the first pompous chord of the overture.

As the Church Scene opened Jim quite forgot where he was; the thronged floor and galleries faded away from him; he was listening, each moment with some new thrill of recognition, to the phrases which Julian had so often played to him at Winchester and, alas, in the jade-green room at Thorpe Castle. Yet the beauty of those remembered phrases, now enhanced by the various richness of Wagner's consummate scoring which seemed to drag the last essence of sweetness out of them, aroused in him an emotion that had nothing to do with Nuremberg, with the passion of Walther and Eva or the resignation of Sachs. They spoke to him rather of all the elusive beauty of all the world, of a tenderness beyond words or tears, of that sweet agony which he had suffered, and craved to suffer, in loving Cynthia. He had told her once that she was poetry. She was music, too; and only in such music as this could her loveliness, detached from herself, achieve an image; though not even Wagner, at his ripest, could do her justice. Where was she now? he wondered. Did she ever think of him? "She must think of me now, at this moment," he told himself, "wherever she is!" For surely, he thought, such acute emotion as this must shear through the flimsy stuff of space and pierce her cold, distant heart? Was her heart, then, so cold? he wondered. At Thorpe Folville, beneath the ghostly autumnal elms, it had not been cold. A creature transfused with fire, she had seemed in those days. But now. . . . The very tenderness of the music mocked him. His heart was hungry and empty. As empty as the vacant Essendine box!

"Enjoying it?" Marcus Hinton asked, when the act-drop fell.

"Of course. There's too much in it for me to take in at once," Jim told him, adjusting his enhavocked mind to ordinary speech.

"Let's stretch our legs in the crush-room," Marcus Hinton said; and they passed out together through corridors whose air was made warm and scented by the luxurious crowd. They stood at the head of the staircase, watching the groups of elegant people who smiled or waved a friendly hand as they passed to Marcus Hinton. George Redlake, with Mrs. Parrot's diamonds and ermine in tow, like a stark cruiser escorting a treasure-ship from Ophir, passed within an arm's length of them. "They certainly wouldn't stand for a performance like this at the Metropolitan," Mrs. Parrot was saying. Jim drew backward instinctively, but George Redlake was far too much engrossed in his prize to notice him.

"There's a man I must speak to over there," Marcus Hinton said. "Can you find your way back again?"

He left Jim alone. At that moment Lady Elizabeth appeared, glancing round her with the carnivorous eagerness of a faded beauty. The illusion of distance had vanished. At close range, the brilliant miniature of the box appeared to have been turned out by a scene-painter in a hurry. Jim hoped to God that she wouldn't recognize him. And, of course, she didn't, though her huge, black, belladonna pupils stared straight into his. As she passed, a familiar intonation startled his ears.

"Too lovely! Don't you think so?"

The voice was almost Cynthia's. He turned, to see the oval, Madonna-like face of the dark girl he had met at the Essendines', Anne Mortimer, Cynthia's cousin.

"I must speak to her," Jim thought. "She'll be almost certain to know when they're coming back."

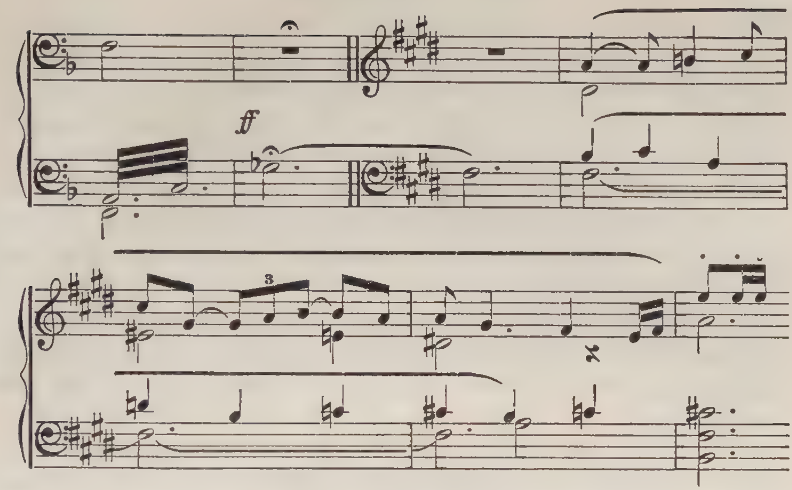
But before he could conquer his timidity and approach her, a tall young man with a golden moustache, whose figure seemed to have been actually moulded by the slim compression of a guardsman's frock-coat, took violent possession of her.

When he returned to the Hintons' box the lights had gone down again. The sprightliness of David and Magdalena did not move him. Beckmesser's humour seemed forced, unreal, too grossly Teutonic; Hans Sachs and Pogner, with their great beards, clumsily ponderous. He felt that the magic of the first act had gone and would never return. From his thoughts of Cynthia the rapture had faded, only the ache remained. Through the web of the music he became aware of his father and Mrs. Parrot, down in the stalls beneath him; of the painted effigy of Lady Elizabeth Purefoy enchanted by distance.

It was only at the very end of the second act that the rapturous earlier mood stole over him again. The stage was dim; the rabble of neighbours and apprentices had broken in on Beckmesser's grotesque serenade and vanished. The peace of the elder-scented night descended once more upon the quiet street and on the silent lovers. Out of its shadows the voice and the figure of the night-watchman emerged.

Hort ihr Leut' und lasst euch sagen,
die Glock' hat elfe geschlagen . . .
Lobet Gott, den Herrn!

The melancholy dissonance of his horn smote across the hushed tremolo of the lower strings, while, out of it, there rose, sustained by an enharmonic modulation, the most piercingly lovely motive of the whole opera, the music of the summer-night.



It caught at Jim's heart. Tears rose in his eyes as he turned them, not knowing why, to the empty Essendine box. Had it vanished? The black gap in the tier was no longer visible. The box was not empty. Who filled it? His heart beat wildly. It was too dark to see. Only one pale figure of a woman detached itself from the curtained background. She leaned on the edge of the box, her chin in her hand. He could not see; yet he knew, for certain, it was Cynthia. The end of the act died away in a *pianissimo* followed by a single loud chord. The floor, the hanging gardens, the amphitheatre and gallery applauded with the noise of a woodland swept by a gust of wind. Grotesque mediæval figures appeared, fore-shortened, through the fold of the curtain. They bowed again and again, retiring reluctantly. The lights went up.

It was she; but she did not see him. Why should she see him? She had turned and was talking vivaciously to the tall, fair guardsman, Anne Mortimer's elegant companion. On his face she turned her blue gaze; on him her parted lips smiled; Jim could see the silhouette of her imperious profile against the dark curtain behind. They are bound to move soon, he thought. If she goes to the crush-room. . . . But Cynthia did not go.

"I think I'll stay here for this interval," he told Marcus Hinton.

"All right. Do you want these glasses?"

"Oh, thank you!" Jim took them gratefully. He adjusted his host's long-sighted focus to his own with fumbling haste. "God, how lovely she is!" he thought. "Why doesn't she turn this way?" Her long, bare arm lay outstretched along the velvet edge of the box, so near, through the glasses, that it seemed he might almost touch it.

When the Third Act began, he still watched her greedily in the dark. The music meant nothing to him; he barely heard it. He was thinking what excuse he could fabricate for Julian's father that would allow him to catch a near sight of her, or even, perhaps, a word, at the end of the opera. Vainly, alas! For, as soon as the Quintette was over, the Essendine party quietly rose and vanished; and the sonorous citizens' chorus acclaiming Hans Sachs fell on ears that heard not.

As he and Marcus Hinton returned to Berkeley Square for supper Jim made poor company for him. What were he or his Nolan Oread to Jim, now that she was near? His brain made weak attempts to express his gratitude with a kind of dazed politeness; but as soon as the Hintons' door closed behind him, he found himself drawn, like a fluttering moth, to the lights of Essendine House.

Next morning, after little sleep, he abandoned all thoughts of his work and telephoned to Cynthia. The butler answered his call. Her ladyship wasn't down yet. Of course he could take a message. Her maid, perhaps. . . . Jim waited. A woman's voice, that of Lucile, Lady Essendine's maid. In bewildering French she explained that she had spoken to Cynthia. Would he call at Essendine House at a quarter to one. He arrived, punctual to the moment.

"I suppose Lady Cynthia's expecting me?" he asked.

"That I can't say, sir," the butler answered politely.

At one o'clock, she appeared, more radiant than ever, in her new spring plumage. He took her gloved hand, no more, for the butler stood by.

"So sorry I've kept you," she said. "How did you know I was here?"

"I saw you at the Opera last night."

"Really? I didn't see you. Why didn't you speak to me?"

"I couldn't. You vanished."

She laughed. "I must vanish again. I'm going to lunch with Anne.

Would you like to escort me? They're quite near, close to Dorchester House."

"Can't we make it further?" he entreated, as they walked out together into the spring air, "or go slower or something? If you knew how hungry I am!"

"So am I, Jim dear." She misunderstood him wilfully. "That's why we must hurry. I'm supposed to be lunching at one."

"Oh, Cynthia, you know what I mean. I'm hungry for the sight of you."

"It'll take quite five minutes, Jim dear. Won't that be enough?"

"Enough! If you knew how I've waited just for this moment! Oh, Cynthia, I love you so terribly!"

She smiled; but was silent.

"Look at me. Let me see you."

"Very well." She gave him her eyes; looked full into his with their wide, their dazzling azure. "Are you satisfied now?" she asked, with a lovely smile. Those eyes, that smile chilled him.

"Not until you've told me that you love me . . . even just a little," he pleaded.

"No, I mustn't say that, Jim darling," she told him, still smiling.

"You mustn't? Why, Cynthia, what do you mean? If you do . . ."

"But I don't, Jim dear. You see it wouldn't be true."

"My God! What do you mean? You *did*, Cynthia?"

"Yes, I suppose I did. I don't know. Oh, Jim dear, do let's talk about something else."

"I want you to explain," he said harshly.

"My dear, I can't possibly explain. Things happen like that. It's just as if something had . . . slipped. I'm terribly fond of you, Jim; but I'm not in love with you."

"Cynthia!"

She shook her head hopelessly. "No, I'm not. Not the least little bit. I'm sorry, Jim."

For a moment or two they walked on in silence. When next she spoke her tone was coldly businesslike.

"That's the house over there," she said. "Someone's just going in. I must run! Good-bye, Jim dear! Please don't look as tragic as that!"

She was gone. The green door with its huge polished knocker closed behind her. When Jim came to himself again, he was lying on his bed in Lupus Street. He pulled himself together. "I suppose I had better try and do some work," he thought. On his way to his sitting-room he perceived the reflection of his own face in Mrs. Pooley's inadequate mirror. He gazed at it curiously. "I look just the same," he thought. "Can a man whose life has been broken look just the same?"

He rang for his tea. The Major "popped up" with it.

"What a day, sir!" he said. "Magnificent! The spring's come at last and no mistake! Yes, this is the genuine article!"

Jim smiled at him wanly. Had the mirror not lied then? Was it possible that anyone could see him without realizing that his life was finished? "Work, work!" he thought. "I must get this out of my mind."

But he couldn't work. His mind was haunted continually by Cynthia's words, the tone in which she had spoken; they flashed across his brain over and over again, like an endless ribbon revolving.

Late that evening, his gathered misery burst out in a savage sonnet.

Now stand I beggared, bankrupt—utterly,
Emptily outcast in a world of rue,
Stooping to find what fragments there may be
Of the fair life I broke when I loved you;
While you, my dear, in a pitiful, dignified
Calm that no passion of mine can distress or derange,
Tell me our new-born love has sickened and died:
"I am changed," you say. . . . Well, one thing shall not change!
Listen! You may give, to all men, all men crave:
Smiles, ardours, languors, kisses. Let them boast
Each possible favour this side of the grave;
Yield your sweet body to the uttermost
Carnal possession, without wounding me:
I have seen in your eyes what no other will see!

"Uttermost carnal possession," he thought grimly. "That ought to suit Starling. This is the last poem I shall ever write."

At nine o'clock Mrs. Pooley breathlessly knocked at his door with a telegram. "I'll wait while you read it," she said, "in case there's an answer. These stairs don't 'alf ketch yer breath if you 'urry up them."

Come Thorpe immediately, he read, *doctor seriously ill. Wire time arrival Melton.*

"No answer, sir?" Mrs. Pooley politely reminded him.

"No answer, thank you." He corrected himself. "Oh yes, there is one. Have you got a time-table handy?"

"I'll send up the Major with one," said Mrs. Pooley.

"I can't get there to-night," Jim thought. "My God, what a day."

He was surprised to see that the signature of the telegram was "Withers."

VI. *The Falling Sky*

IT WAS fortunate for Jim, perhaps, that the two blows had fallen together, and that each helped to numb the pain of the other. If his emotional existence had been wrecked by Cynthia, it seemed likely that his material life would be altered by this later catastrophe. The foundations of each had crumbled; his sentience had lost touch with them, and floated uneasily in a void, detached from reality; and the visible world, as he saw it on that May morning, ironically reinforced that sense of the unreal by clothing itself in a vague, vernal mistiness, through which, as in a dream, he watched the sudden miracle of a late spring revealed in drifts of sloe-bloom, still persistent though hedges of quick stood fledged with leaf and buds of apple-blossom already swelled to bursting—all middle England stirring in a green dream of resurgent life. "How strange it is," he thought, "that I can feel nothing! This body of mine that goes hurtling along through all this beauty is quite dead. If the train left the rails and were crushed to splinters it would make no difference to me!"

In mild sunshine, at Melton, Ernest received him dolefully. His solemn face showed that he, at any rate, was still capable of sensation. He had something to feel about, and no mistake. In another week he might find himself out of a job, and that was no blooming joke at his time of life!

"How is he?" Jim said, hardly daring to ask the question.

"They don't tell me nothing but orders, Master Jim," Ernest answered resentfully; "Dr. Swain from Leicester's been over two or three times: but, as I say, when it's come to the length of leeches and suchlike old-fashioned things, it looks middling bad. Specialists is *one* thing," he went on impressively, "but lawyers and parsons is another; and I'd sooner see an undertaker walk in with a tape measure than that Withers and Jewell hangin' about the house. What's more, as I've told Eliza not once nor twice, there's a white owl been flittering round our stable for a fortnight past, and *that* bodes no good, as you know as well as me. That beggar's come for the doctor, I told Eliza. *And* he has!"

"Has he been ill long . . . really ill, I mean?"

Ernest nodded mysteriously. "Ever since that day when you bust up the springs of the trap he's been falling off for all to see. It's my belief he got overheated the same as the mare and then struck with the cold. 'My last run,' he says, 'Ernest!'—and, by gum, he wasn't far out!"

"It's partly my fault then," Jim thought. "I oughtn't to have let him do it." Let him do it! It would have been easier to stop a pack of hounds in full cry.

At Rose Cottage Ernest pulled up. "You're bedded here, Master Jim," he said. "No room at The Grange. There's a locust, as the mistress calls him, doing the work, an elderly gentleman, besides the nurse that Dr. Swain sent in three days ago."

Miss Minnet, who, to hide her feelings, insisted on staggering away with Jim's luggage, was more voiceless than usual. She flung her thin arms round Jim's neck and kissed him, then hid her face pitifully. "Don't take any notice of *me*, Jim," she whispered. So Miss Minnet, also, could feel! "You'll find some lunch waiting for you in the dining-room," she told him plaintively.

"I think, if you don't mind," Jim said, "I'd better go home first."

"Just a cup of beef-tea or some cocoa," Miss Minnet pleaded. "So comforting in time of trouble!"

He refused politely. At The Grange, in the pitchpine hall, two figures were standing engaged in a hushed conversation. Aunt Margaret was one of them; the other, Withers, the lawyer. As Jim entered they broke off suddenly.

"So you got my telegram all right?" Withers said, with a businesslike smile.

"I wish you had sent it before. It was too late for me to travel last night."

"He didn't ask for you till yesterday afternoon," Aunt Margaret put in.

"Well, you needn't have waited for that," Jim answered roughly. "I suppose I'd better go upstairs."

Aunt Margaret threw herself across his path. "You'll do no such thing!" she cried. "Nobody can do that without the nurse's permission. She had orders from Dr. Swain."

Withers nodded emphatically. "Your aunt's quite right," he said. "Swain gives his orders, and we've got to go by them. In times like this you can't have people running in and out. Why don't you ask Mrs. Weston, Margaret?" he suggested.

"She's resting—asleep I hope. I'm not going to disturb her for anyone," she answered stubbornly.

"Look here, Aunt Margaret, this is all rot!" Jim grew angry. "If he's asked for me, I'm going to see him at once."

As he moved to the stairs, Withers laid a restraining hand on his shoulder. "Steady, steady, young man!"

"What the devil is it to do with you?" Jim cried. Withers answered with an ugly snigger.

"Oh, Jim, how *can* you?" Aunt Margaret exclaimed. "If you'll promise to stay here, I'll go and ask mother, though I know I oughtn't."

She tip-toed upstairs, disappearing with an anxious glance behind her, as though she feared that, as soon as her back was turned, Mr. Withers and Jim would start quarrelling. Withers himself continued to stand blocking the stairway, with the air of a bailiff in possession. He shot out his thin lower lip pugnaciously and began to pare his nails with a mother-of-pearl pocket-knife, glancing at Jim, sardonically, from time to time above the rims of his spectacles. Neither of them spoke a word. Upstairs a soft thudding of slippered footsteps was heard; a stairboard creaked. To Jim, the silence had a quality of alert, expectant hostility. Mr. Withers continued to manicure himself. Jim could stand no more of it.

"When Aunt Margaret comes down," he said, "you might tell her she'll find me in the surgery."

Withers smiled and nodded.

What is *he* doing here? Jim thought. The presence of Withers was as sinister as Ernest had suggested. That whispering with Aunt Margaret! What on earth were they whispering about? And why this complacent proprietary air on the part of a stranger? He made his way into the surgery. Here, at least, there was something familiar and reassuring in the odour of tinctures and aromatic medicaments amid which he had worked so long in the old man's company. Even that was changed. The old orderliness, on which Dr. Weston prided himself, had gone. The counter lay littered with unwashed medicine measures, dirty bottles, struck matches, orange-peel, cigarette-ends, and sealing-wax. The linoleum floor was smeared with spilt syrups and muddy with footmarks. The places, which, of old, had the ascetic cleanliness of a monastic cell now resembled a parrot's cage. In the little consulting-room, beyond the dispensary partition, there sat at the doctor's desk a slovenly, elderly man with a scurfy coat-collar, the recognizable, seedy type of practitioner who drifts from place to place as a *locum tenens* or ship's surgeon. When Jim entered, he seemed to be dozing. Then, suddenly regaining a modified consciousness, he looked up with a leer. "Hello!" he said. "What do *you* want? I can't see anyone before six."

His voice was heavily charged with whisky and orange-peel, the second, apparently, designed to conceal the smell of the first. Jim explained who he was.

"Oh, *that's* it, is it?" he mumbled. "Oh, yes. I've heard about you. I thought it was another damned patient. These blasted people keep you running all day and all night. My name's Leacroft . . . Dr. Leacroft. Have you seen your grandfather yet?"

"No, I've only arrived this minute," Jim told him. "My Aunt's just gone upstairs to see if I can."

Dr. Leacroft chuckled obscenely. "To ask if you can? It can't make any difference now. He won't know you, anyway. Let's see . . . you're a medico, aren't you? Verbum sat. In that case you'll understand without my explaining as you have to with laymen. Bright's. High blood-pressure. Weakened capillary walls. Then a right-sided cerebral hæmorrhage and left-sided paralysis. He's had two more strokes in the last twenty-four hours. You know what that means?"

"You say he's not conscious?"

"Conscious? Not a glimmer of it! He's been gone, you might say, to all intents and purposes, since the day before yesterday."

"But look here," Jim began. . . . "No, that can't be right. They told me that he asked them to wire for me yesterday afternoon."

"Then they told you a damned lie, my son," Dr. Leacroft laughed. "I've been stuck in this hole nine days, for my sins. *I* know all about it. Why, they routed me out at ten the night before last when he had his first stroke. I tell you it's a perfectly typical case . . ." He went maundering on in his whisky-blurred voice through a catalogue of clinical details.

Jim didn't listen. He had come to life at last in a blinding fury of resentment. They had all deceived him! They had kept him away from Thorpe for some purpose of their own! Even Lucy! Lucy, at least, might have fought for his rights. His rights? What rights had he? None, indeed, apart from the fact that he loved his grandfather, and believed that the old man loved him. "But such as they are," he thought, "by God, I'm going to assert them!"

He left the *locum* still mumbling his drunken anatomy and hurried back to the hall. The door of the *porte-cochère* stood open. On the step Aunt Margaret was bidding a coquettish farewell to the lawyer, whose car stood waiting.

"I'll drive out first thing in the morning," Withers was saying. He leered at her over his shoulder as he let in the clutch; his grey, pinched face had lost the expression of sardonic amusement he had given to Jim. "Oh, how good you are!" Aunt Margaret gushed. "Till to-morrow then!" She watched him start with a rapt and languishing smile. Jim touched her shoulder.

"Aunt Margaret!" he said.

She started. Her ecstatic face fell suddenly. Her look was defensive. She turned to Jim with a nervous, fluttered smile whose falseness sent the blood to his head again. He was having no nonsense now!

"Well . . . ?" he asked her grimly.

"Mother's sleeping. I couldn't disturb her," she told him. Her eyes had the look of a savage, cornered cat's. As well they might! She could not escape him now.

"That makes no difference," he said. "What about grandpapa?"

"He—he's sleeping too," she stammered. "You mustn't disturb him."

"If he's sleeping," Jim answered scornfully, "I shan't disturb him. I'm going up now."

He made straight for the stairs. She followed him; caught at his arm.

"Jim . . . I forbid you!" she cried.

Who the devil was *she* to forbid him? He shook her off roughly.

She gave a sharp cry and fell back several paces. He didn't even look at her. He went straight upstairs to the landing. The door of his own little room was ajar. As he passed it he saw, for one instant, the black-hearted sampler of Africa, and a chair on which there lay folded a white nurse's overall and a pair of starched cuffs. At the door of his grandfather's room he paused for one moment.

"Not in there! Mother's sleeping there! I told you!"

Aunt Margaret who had recovered from her shock, was following, close on his heels, with big, frightened eyes.

"Well, where is he?" Jim asked.

She shook her head wildly. "You've no right," she began. . . .

No right! Jim opened the next door and stalked right in. The mild light of a May afternoon filled the room. On a rocking-chair in the window a woman in nurse's uniform sat reading, and rocked as she read. As Jim entered she looked up and stared at him with surprise. "Please . . ." she said; but Jim took no notice.

In the midst of the great mahogany Victorian bed, Dr. Weston lay propped up with pillows. Could this really be he? Jim thought, as he gazed at that bearded, shrunken figure. One hand lay outstretched on the coverlet lifelessly; the other, bent at the elbow, was clutched to his breast, lifeless too, one would have thought, but for a sudden contraction that stirred it momentarily, like the twitching one sometimes sees in the limbs of a sleeping animal. Dr. Weston's determined mouth hung lax and open, and, through it, his breathing came with a regular sinister rhythm. Shallow at first, with each inspiration it gradually deepened, until, at the height of the curve, his whole body was shaken by its stertorous violence. Then, by equal descending degrees it grew shallow again, dying away so quietly that at last he seemed not to breathe at all.

Awed, fascinated by this terrible sound, like that of a wind in a pinewood rising from a vague whisper to a fury of tossing boughs, then slowly subsiding into silence, Jim gazed at his grandfather's face. His right eyelid drooped, half-closed; the other, wide-open, stared straight at Jim. It saw not, yet seemed to see. What did it see? The familiar room, the light of the mild May day that smote across it, the watchful figure of the stranger in nurse's uniform, the awe-struck boy? That wide-eyed, unfaltering gaze looked far beyond those, beyond the appearance of life, which is all that the living see. It looked through them, past them, with a fixed, contemptuous serenity. "Have you no more than this to show me after all?" it seemed to ask.

As the cycle of mounting respirations began again, Jim advanced to the bedside and kissed his grandfather's brow. The nurse hovered behind him, like an anxious, distrustful bird, protecting her nest.

Jim turned to her. "Thank you," he said. She, at least, had been gentle.

There was no more to be seen or said. He passed from the room, hardly knowing whither, until, on the landing outside, he found himself faced by his grandmother. She stood in his path, with Aunt Margaret, who had summoned her, gaping behind. For a moment Jim scarcely recognized Mrs. Weston. She was almost as much changed from her normal self as the dying man. Her figure, to begin with, had been freed from its usual scaffolding of whalebone. No longer augmented and concealed by puffed shoulders and spreading draperies of stiff material, it was closely wrapped, like the spare, dry shred of a mummy, in the grey flannel dressing-gown which she had snatched up when Margaret awoke her. Again, Jim had never seen her before without her teeth, the lack of which made her cheeks and lips look curiously indrawn; while the absence of the peaked lace cap which she habitually wore not only diminished her height but also revealed that her small head, flattened like a viper's, was almost as bald as her husband's, being covered by nothing but a few long, grey strands of hair dragged backward and twisted in a knotted wisp behind. Her sunken face was dead pale; all the life in it seemed concentrated in her black and—as it almost seemed—lidless eyes; yet that life was so potent, even now, as to radiate from her mean presence an overwhelming force.

"What were you doing in there?" Her voice, for the lack of her teeth, had a dry, sibilant quality, in keeping with the flattened skull and those cold black eyes. "What were you doing in there? Explain!" she repeated, her head thrust forward.

"I've been to see him," Jim said.

"You had no right to go there without permission."

"I'd as much right as anyone living. Why didn't you send for me before?"

"I've told you," Aunt Margaret broke in. "He only asked for you yesterday."

"Yes, I know that you told me a lie," Jim answered her fiercely. "I know that he's not been conscious since the day before yesterday."

"How dare you . . ." Aunt Margaret began.

"Hold your tongue, Margaret," the old woman hissed at her. She turned on Jim. "Go downstairs . . . at once!" she said.

"You've kept me away from him," Jim cried, "and now it's too late."

His voice broke on the word. In the doorway of the bedroom the nurse appeared, attracted by curiosity or concern at their raised voices. She peered out, then pointedly closed the door in their faces.

"The least you can do, now you've come," Mrs. Weston said, "is to behave with common decency. Please get out of my way. I wish to go inside."

She stretched out her arm, imperiously, to displace him. There was nothing to be done but to make way for her. A tiny, malignant figure, she swept past him and entered the doctor's room.

"I *told* you," said Margaret triumphantly.

"Yes, you told me a lot of damned lies, you and Withers between you."

"How dare you say such a thing!"

Conscious now of the breach of decency of which Mrs. Weston had reminded him, Jim forced back the words that came to his tongue and went downstairs. Margaret followed him like a watchdog intent on seeing that he did no further mischief, only abandoning her charge when he had reached the foot of the stairs. In the pitch-pine hall the marmoset passed him, carrying a tray of tea-things; her shrivelled face twitched into a smile, immediately suppressed. She hurried by into the dining-room and began to clatter her cups and saucers, as though any noise were a relief in that stricken house.

"Where's Miss Lucy, Eliza?" Jim asked.

"I don't know, Master Jim." Her mouth fell at the corners. "Now you've done it! You've made me speak!" her red little eyes protested, as she put a table-napkin to her face and rushed from the room, while the canaries, aroused to competitive noise by her clattering tea-things, skipped about in their cage and burst into exultant song.

"O Lord, I can't stand this row," Jim thought. "This house it too awful!" He left it, to look for Ernest in the stables. The man was not there. Eliza had sought another release for her emotions in frenzied activity at the back-door pump. She was pumping away like mad till she saw Jim approaching and bolted incontinently. In the blossomed quarender apple-tree, whose summer fruit he had eaten as a child, a magnificent blackbird, his head uplifted, was singing his heart out. His boyish whistle struck Jim as more treacherous to his present emotion than the canaries' trilling. That he should sing so blithely beneath that awful window! Wherever he went he could not escape from the danger of tears. The horses in the stables, including the pensioned roan; the mushroom smell of the vats where the old man made ketchup; the saddle and harness suspended in the coach-house, each plated stirrup and curb and bit proudly polished by Ernest as though they might be needed to-morrow; above Ernest's table, nailed to the wall, a recipe for harness-blacking written in the doctor's beautiful old-fashioned copperplate; all these things had power to assault and wound him now. He fled from them, down the garden, to the hilly paddock. From the spinney at the top of it a cuckoo emerged; its soft call floated lazily down through the warm air as it pointed in even flight for the Castle elms.

"Cuckoo . . . cuckoo . . ." he sang, all spring in his notes. For the second time in those ghastly twenty-four hours Jim's heart broke; he found himself crying.

When he had recovered his self-possession sufficiently to show his face again, he returned to the house. In the dining-room Aunt Margaret and Lucy were having tea. He was thankful to see Lucy there. She, at least, belonged to an older, happier order of things. He went over and kissed her soft brown cheek. She kissed him again, with a formal, perfunctory coldness. No doubt Aunt Margaret had been telling her a lot of lies about his scandalous intrusion. Well, he could soon put that right when he had her to himself. Aunt Margaret had evidently decided not to speak to him. She sat at the head of the table in a regal attitude, a clumsy imitation of Mrs. Weston's.

Jim tried to make conversation with Lucy; asked where she had been.

"With Hubert, at Rossington," she told him primly; and she let her hand lie on the table conspicuously displaying the new engagement ring that Mr. Holly had given her. Her attitude towards Jim was strictly non-committal, as though, in Aunt Margaret's presence, she were not quite certain whether she could afford to be friendly. Aunt Margaret, who made no pretence of having lost her appetite, pointedly excluded Jim from their conversation by carefully phrased questions and allusions that were unintelligible to him. When she left them it looked as if Lucy were anxious to follow her. Jim begged her to stay. It was clear that she lingered unwillingly.

"Don't tell me," he said, "that you've turned against me like all the rest of them."

"Turned against you? Whatever do you mean, Jim?" she answered calmly.

"You know quite well what I mean. You know that they never sent for me until it was too late. Even when I got here, they tried to keep me away from him."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Jim." She smiled uneasily. "How *can* you imagine things like that?" She turned to the door.

"Don't go, Lucy!" he pleaded.

"I simply must get this hat off. It makes my head ache."

"Well, that won't take long. I'll wait here for you."

She sighed. "You'd much better go down to Rose Cottage," she said collectedly. "I'm sure Miss Minnet's expecting you. After all, it's no earthly good your waiting here . . ."

"Where I'm not wanted?" He laughed, completing the sentence for her.

"Oh, *why* are you so touchy?" she complained. "You know you can't do any good here."

"Or there, for that matter," Jim thought bitterly, "or anywhere else in the world! She's quite right."

At the moment when he left The Grange to return to Rose Cottage that evening, the terrible rhythm of Cheyne-Stokes respiration was broken; the wind that died down in the pinewood failed to rise again. As a matter of form the nurse summoned the "locum," who emerged from his clouds of whisky and orange-peel to confirm her verdict. Dr. Weston was dead. To all intents and purposes he had been dead for more than two days. Jim learned the news half an hour later at Rose Cottage, which it entered, as village news will, by a whisper at the kitchen door. Miss Minnet told him, with agonized eyes and trembling lips. Jim wished to God, for the sake of his strained composure, that she wouldn't be so sweet about it. It was her distress rather than the news itself that moved him. "How callous she will find me!" he thought. He wasn't callous. He was numb, null, non-existent. In order to distract him she began to prattle with childlike garrulity about his life in London. "How lovely it must be for you," she said, "to know the Essendines!" When she went into raptures over Cynthia's beauty, Jim could stand it no longer and said he must go to bed. She kissed him good-night with a glistening, forced brightness in her eyes; but when he had put out the light, a thin, whimpering sound from the adjoining room made him suspect that the frail little thing was crying to herself in the dark.

Two days later Dr. Weston was buried. The funeral was an elaborate, pompous affair of a kind which the old man himself would have viewed with derision. Two clergymen officiated: Mr. Jewell, in mourning for his poor bereaved liver, and Mr. Holly as one—or very nearly one—of the family. The coffin was carried to the church by Ernest and five of the doctor's tenants, beneath a heap of elaborate wreaths and crosses from all over the countryside, amid which, to Mrs. Weston's satisfaction, those of the Essendines and the minor local nobility were prominently displayed. Jim walked with Lucy behind Aunt Margaret and his grandmother. Lucy cried quietly at his side. Aunt Margaret, in the expensive new mourning which she had worn for Rupert Mohun, shed inexhaustible streams of tears throughout the ceremony. Jim was sorry for Lucy. Her emotion, at least, was genuine; but Aunt Margaret's, he felt, was, like her singing, a mere physical debauch. Perhaps he misjudged her; perhaps, in her own way, she had loved her father as much as he did; but that way, he felt, was in any case so different from his that her grief didn't bring her any nearer to him.

Far more admirable, indeed, was the attitude of Mrs. Weston. That, at least, had a sombre dignity of its own. Jim's grandmother was no longer the wispish, mummified figure who had challenged him on the landing three days before. She was reclothed, and, as it were, amplified, in her usual black satin, but unadorned with any jewellery. Her hands were encased in black kid, her peaked bonnet was draped with an enormous falling veil of heavy crape; her impassive, perfectly-chiselled features, dead white against this funereal darkness, had a quality no longer of porcelain but of monumental marble. She resembled now, more than ever, her model, the widowed Victoria, in her regal calm, in her indisputable self-control, though even that masterful queen could hardly have vied with the stony serenity of her immobile face. Queen Victoria, at least, was a woman: Mrs. Weston merely a dynamic will made manifest in living stone. So impressive, indeed, was her presence, her apparently static figure so charged with high spiritual potentials, that the rest of the funeral party—Mr. Jewell mumbling the office; Mr. Holly suavely sorrowful; Aunt Margaret, profusely dissolving; poor soft little Lucy; Miss Minnet, blindly grappling with the Dead March from Saul through a deluge of tears; Lady Essendine, standing, as became an outsider, at a distance; even Jim himself, dry-eyed but pale as death—seemed, somehow, to belong to a natural species of a texture less firm, less qualified to secure survival than hers. These people all drooped, in various degrees, beneath the burden of human mortality. Mrs. Weston's will, in the vehicle of that slender body, sustained it triumphantly. For her, in truth, if death had its sting, the grave had no victory. Even Mrs. Jewell, whose sense of Christian propriety, combined with a natural inquisitiveness, had prevailed on her to let bygones be bygones on this occasion, was forced to admit, for once, her rival's magnificence.

When the party returned to The Grange Mrs. Weston immediately ushered them into the gilt drawing-room. The traditional order of the ceremony required that they should listen to the reading of the will. With the exception of the old lady they all approached it awkwardly, as though, indeed, such a thing as a written will were a matter of form quite unnecessary among people who had no material desires and understood each other so thoroughly. They sat down with one accord in a constrained silence, as though the room were an extension of the church, at the precise moment when the little French clock, with a frivolous lack of propriety, tinkled out three.

This gathering, to Jim, had a curiously theatrical quality. It was a scene in a play, in which he was taking the double part of actor and audience. All the possible beneficiaries, himself, Aunt Margaret, Lucy, Mr. Holly, the marmoset, sat awkwardly on the edges of their chairs, with downcast eyes, disclaiming any interest in the document which Mr. Withers would read. Mrs. Weston had established herself in her usual position at the side of the fireplace, her gloved hands folded, her lips compressed, looking straight before her. Suddenly she turned her black eyes on Mr. Withers and nodded. He pulled out a long, folded document from his breast-pocket and cleared his throat.

"I don't know," he began, "if you want me to bother with all the preliminaries and legal formulas. If you wish me to do so . . ."

"Do just as you like, Mr. Withers," the old lady commanded.

"Then I think, to save time, and because we're all of us naturally tired by this sad ceremony, I'll just run through the main provisions of the will as they come. It's a testament that I drew up for the doctor about ten years ago. There are two executors appointed: Mrs. Weston and myself. First of all, there's the bequest of this house, the Thorpe Folville property and all personal belongings to Mrs. Weston, who is joint executrix with me, and residuary legatee, absolutely, when the other dispositions have been fulfilled. It's a simple will. Various lands and houses, equivalent to about two thirds of the testator's belongings, are divided, more or less equally, between his three daughters or their children—in other words between Miss Weston, Miss Fenton and Mr. Redlake. To particularise: all the house property in Leicester and Melton goes to Miss Weston."—He glanced friendlily at Margaret, who smiled—"Brocker—that's the big farm, you know—and Leesby Pastures go to Miss Lucy; Little Stygate, which marches with Brocker, and Essendine Fold, and the houses in Essendine village, become yours, Mr. Redlake."

He paused. During this recitation, Jim had been aware of a sudden quickening in the others' bowed heads when each of their own names had been spoken. At Lucy's, Mr. Holly had given a jump, like a terrier at the mention of rats. There was nothing, so far, of which Jim had not been already informed on those long country drives during which the old man had so often and so proudly numbered his possessions.

"That's the gist of the original will," Mr. Withers was saying. "Now we come to the codicils. The first of these was executed in my office in January last. It provides for an annuity of fifty-two pounds, a pound a week that is, to Eliza Eagles." He pointed to the marmoset, who instantly clapped her hands to her eyes and burst into tears. "From such a date," he continued, addressing Eliza directly, "as you retire from Mrs. Weston's service."

"I shall never leave the mistress, *never*," the marmoset cried, "never, as long as I live."

"I might leave you first," Mrs. Weston remarked laconically. "If you're going to cry, Eliza, you'd better go to the kitchen."

"This codicil also provides in its second clause," Mr. Withers went on, "for a separate annuity of two hundred and fifty pounds to the testator's second daughter, Elizabeth Redlake."

He said he was going to do that, Jim thought. He remembered the day when he had walked the mare up and down the main street of Melton; the day of their cross-country hunt in the trap. The last run! How distant it seemed!

"Now comes the second and last codicil," Mr. Withers continued, "which was executed in my presence and in this house five days ago. This second codicil revokes the second clause of the first, in other words the annuity settled on Mrs. Redlake. It also slightly modifies the original bequest to the testator's grandson, James Redlake."

Jim felt his face flushing. Modifies? What on earth could that mean. He knew that the lowered eyes of all the others—of Lucy, Mr. Holly, Aunt Margaret, even those of the tearful marmoset—were steadfastly fixed on him. Only his grandmother, who appeared to hear nothing, continued to gaze straight in front of her. "To put it quite simply," Mr. Withers went on, "the modification is this. Instead of Mr. Redlake inheriting the properties bequeathed to him immediately, a trust is created. The income, subject to a charge of three thousand pounds in Miss Weston's favour, carrying interest at five per cent, is to accumulate during the lifetime of the residual legatee, Mrs. Weston, or be expended by her in his interest at her discretion during that period. I think the idea of this, if I may be permitted to explain"—Mrs. Weston nodded her approval—"was to assure that during Mr. Redlake's minority and, let us hope, for some long time afterwards, this considerable property should not be controlled by any interested person, such as the legatee's father or mother." Mr. Withers smiled blandly. "Well, I think that is all," he said, as he folded the document. "I shall apply for probate immediately. Good-bye, Mrs. Weston!"

The old lady acknowledged his salutation with a quick nod. He turned to go. Margaret rose briskly and followed him. The marmoset scuttled away to her kitchen. Mr. Holly took Lucy's arm. They, too, drifted away. The clock tinkled half past three, as though it had been suppressing a desire to giggle during the whole solemnity. Jim was left alone with his grandmother.

Not that Mrs. Weston appeared to be aware of his presence. She continued to sit bolt upright at the fireside without movement or sound, in complete catalepsy. When Jim looked at her enquiringly she took not the least notice of him. At the moment his own brain was in a state of chaos, incapable of grasping the full import of what he had heard. That the old man should have been prevailed upon to revoke the legacy to his mother Jim found natural enough; by no other means could he have made his peace with the implacable old lady during his last, weak days. And that didn't matter; his mother would not expect it and could do without it; her future, in any case, was wrapped up with Dr. Fosdyke's.

His own position, however, seemed more obscure. He wasn't exactly disinherited—though the doctor, no doubt, had had a hard fight to save him from this—yet his inheritance, seriously diminished by the sum that was due to Aunt Margaret, was to remain under the tight control of this woman who hated him. Not one penny, it seemed, could come to him, during her lifetime, except by her favour. His future, his present, rested in those black-gloved hands. How would she use it? Well, he could only enquire.

"What do you want me to do, gran?" he asked her bluntly.

"You can do what you like," she answered. "That is your business."

"Do you want me to stay here?"

"At Thorpe? Most decidedly not."

"I just want to know my position."

"Your position's quite clear, I should think. You've heard the will read. When I die you inherit the property which your grandfather insisted on leaving to you." Her tone implied that she had no intention of dying.

"Against your advice?" he asked bitterly.

"Against my advice," she repeated. "However . . ."

"But in the meantime," Jim persisted awkwardly, "there's my work at St. Luke's. Do you wish me to go on with it? If you want me to take up the practice . . ."

"The practice belongs to me. It is already advertised for sale. The *locum tenens* will stay here till it's sold."

"You don't want me to qualify, then?"

"You can do what you like, as I've told you. That doesn't concern me."

"I suppose I must live . . ."

"That again, is your business. Not mine."

"Mr. Withers said something about 'my interests,' I think?"

"And my discretion. The matter is left in my hands."

"Your discretion?" Jim asked. "You mean that you want me to starve?"

She gazed at him calmly. "Your Aunt Margaret's claims come first: three thousand pounds, carrying interest at five per cent. That's a hundred and fifty pounds of interest in the first year, less afterwards, till the capital is paid. The Essendine village property is in bad condition and needs money spending on it. So do the farms. That, of course, is all to your advantage . . . ultimately."

"Ultimately . . . yes. But now? Was it grandpapa's intention that you should make me some kind of allowance?"

"Perhaps. There's no mention of that in the will."

"It's surely implied?"

"We shall see. I shall have to consult Mr. Withers."

"That fellow!"

Mrs. Weston was roused for the first time. "I forbid you to speak like that. Mr. Withers is your grandfather's executor, and your Aunt Margaret's future husband."

"Aunt Margaret's? I see. So that's how the land lies. That explains everything."

"Be careful what you're saying. If you dare to imply . . ."

Mrs. Weston rose slowly. She stood up and faced him, as, ten years before, she had faced George Redlake. Her features shone out from their hood of crape with an icy pallor; she began to speak rapidly, scarcely opening her thin lips.

"You hate your Aunt Margaret, don't you?" she said. "You have always hated her and laughed at her. Tell the truth, now!" she taunted him. "Admit it!" His silence infuriated her. "That's why," she went on, "I'm going to let her see you suffer now. You and your mother between you have done the best you could to wreck her life. This abominable divorce! You knew all about it! It was planned out of wicked jealousy to prevent her marriage, to bring disgrace on all of us. It didn't do that, thank God! Captain Mohun was spared the shame of hearing of it. But it did something else; it broke your grandfather's heart; it killed him as surely as if you'd stabbed or poisoned him! And I'll see that you both suffer for it, she through you, as long as I live."

"Gran, what are you saying?" Jim protested. "That's simply ridiculous . . ." Once more the flood of icy words swept over him.

"If your grandfather hadn't been a fool I'd have made you suffer more. A soft fool, as he always was! Who made this money? Who schemed and scraped and bought the land and the houses? I . . . I . . . ! If I'd had my way you should never have touched a penny of it. And as long as I'm living . . ." She could not finish her sentence. The words choked her; her face was convulsed. "Get out of my sight! Go . . . go! Let me never set eyes on you again!"

She raised her clenched fists. He was face to face with a madwoman. Then, suddenly her eyes stared; her hands fell; she collapsed in her Empire chair. She began to rock herself to and fro, sobbing like a child.

"Oh, John, John," she wailed, "Oh, John, my poor love!"

"Gran, gran!" he cried. Tears started to his eyes. He fell at her feet overwhelmed. He could do nothing to soothe her. Though he clasped her gloved hand she appeared to be unaware of him. She went on rocking her body to and fro. He vaguely supposed it would be better to leave her alone. In the pitch-pine hall the sound of her sobs still reached him, as terrible, in its way, as that of his grandfather's breathing before he died. Both sounds were inhuman and awful. He felt they would haunt him for ever. The hall was empty. Its air was saturated with the odour of some tarry disinfectant, not the clean, antiseptic smell of the surgery, but another, suggestive of death and decay. He fled from it, instinctively. He opened the door and stood on the step, breathing into his lungs the sweet, living air outside. As he stood there, still undetermined, Jim experienced the strange intuition of something significant and momentous. Across the pavement of the *porte-cochère* ran a double file of red bricks let into the cobbles, marking the division between the private property of The Grange and the public footpath. In Jim's eyes, at that moment, this line of brick assumed a symbolical importance. It became the double ruling of red ink that closes an account in a ledger or the foot of a page. It represented a kind of spiritual Rubicon, the visible boundary between two definite compartments of his life. "When my body passes that line," he thought, "it will never return; though some part of me may revisit this place in dreams, my body will have left it for ever. How strange it all is! When once I have crossed that line I must never look back."

He stepped out into the street, that symbolical act performed. He had no idea, for the moment, where he was going, though some vague determination, of which he now became conscious, suggested that he was bound for the Malthuses' at Cold Orton. The emergence of this idea checked his steps. "If I'm going to Cold Orton," he thought, "I ought to have turned to the right, instead of to the left; but I can't turn back now; I must never look at that house again." And he went on his way down the street, mechanically acknowledging the awed salutations that the tradesmen gave him, till he found himself knocking again at the door of Rose Cottage.

"My darling boy!" Miss Minnet twittered. "Come in; let me give you some tea. It's all on the table."

Her eyes were still red with crying at the organ. She fluttered about him solicitously, with quick, forced smiles and small, trivial questions; but the sight of her red eyes and tremulous lips prevented him from answering her, for fear of losing his hardly-maintained composure.

"A nice cup of tea's a wonderful comfort; there's nothing like it," she said. "Will you take your own cream and sugar?" And she darted and pecked like a gay little innocent bird in a cage, with her tear-bright eyes, while Jim sat in silence. "I know that your heart's far too full for you to want to talk much," she said; "but you needn't take any notice of me."

But Jim did want to talk. His heart was so full that he had to. Not that little Miss Minnet was an ideal listener, though, after all, she loved him and was his mother's friend, and any confidant at that moment was better than none.

"I've had a most ghastly time . . ." he began. Miss Minnet cooed sympathetically, her head on one side: "Of course, of course, darling boy!" He shook his head. "No, it's not what you mean," he told her; "that goes without saying; but I think—" He smiled wanly—"I think my grandmother's mad, unless I'm mad too."

"Oh, Jim!" she protested. "Whatever . . ."

Then it all came out in a spate; the scene in the drawing-room, his interview with his grandmother, embroidered, in spite of himself, with a sort of bitter humour. Miss Minnet gasped. "Oh, Jim," she cried, "it's impossible! Your grandfather was devoted to you. Why, everyone knows it!"

"Impossible? Wait till I've finished! The codicil was added last week. He probably didn't quite realize what he was doing, unless he was too tired to put up a fight any longer. That's why they didn't send for me. God knows what lies they told him! That man Withers is in it."

"I never liked the look of him," Miss Minnet declared. "A regular lawyer's face!" She pursed her lips and shook her head rapidly. Her tight little mouth and red eyes gave her the air of a ferocious ferret.

"Did you know," Jim asked, "that Aunt Margaret is going to marry him?"

"Marry Withers?" Miss Minnet gasped. "Why that explains everything! Undue influence. That's what it is!" she said, remembering a legal phrase. "That man's old enough to be her father. A most scandalous state of affairs!"

"But that doesn't help matters, does it?" Jim said hopelessly. "You read in books of people disputing wills; but here there seems nothing to dispute. It's terribly clear. As long as gran's living, she can simply keep me stranded."

"I wish," said Miss Minnet, deliberately conscious of her own wickedness but throwing conscience to the winds, "I wish she would die to-morrow!"

"You see I have nothing," Jim said, "but my books and my clothes and a few pounds left over from a cheque that grandpapa sent me."

"There's your mother, Jim darling. You know where she is?"

"She's staying in Italy till the divorce proceedings are finished. But in any case," he declared, "I'm not going to be a drag upon her. God knows she's been treated badly enough already. Besides, after all, I'm not a child any longer. I'm a man. If I'm put to it I can surely earn my own living. I've got to. It's only that this is so unexpected."

Miss Minnet considered the case with rapt concentration.

"There's your father, of course," she said.

Jim shook his head. "No thank you. I know all about him. Much more than I did a year ago."

"Well darling," Miss Minnet cooed sympathetically. "After all, you don't have to settle everything to-night. Whenever you're faced with a problem like this, I always say that you ought to sleep on it. Of course you know that you're welcome to stay at Rose Cottage as long as you want to. I should like you to feel it's your home. Besides," she added, as if she had suddenly been struck with an inspiration, "the fact of your remaining in Thorpe might put them to shame!"

Not much chance of that! Jim thought. Though he had freed his mind of part of its burden, it was no earthly use, he decided, to go on talking with poor Miss Minnet, who was just as helpless as himself.

"I think, if you don't mind," he said, "I'll go to my room. You won't feel I'm rude if I don't come down to supper, will you?"

She accompanied him upstairs and tenderly kissed him good-night. The fact that he had confided in her had given Miss Minnet a rich pleasure. "If I had a son of my own," she reflected, "he'd be just about Jim's age. But I mustn't think about such things," she told herself firmly. "I must count my blessings," though it did seem a shame that she couldn't hold him asleep in her arms. She went down to the kitchen and warned the new maid to be careful not to make any noise. Then she sat like a mouse in the drawing-room, thinking of Jim and her darling Elizabeth, and knitting, and reading in the

Church Times a splendid article on the Holy Eucharist, that would do Mr. Jewell good, till the light in the May sky faded, so that she could see neither to read nor knit, and fat thrushes went rustling to their roosts in the laurel hedge, and the wings of owls swooped softly down through the dusk.

VII. *Reverie in Green*

JIM woke early next morning. His mind, refreshed by the sleep of complete exhaustion, decided at once that Thorpe Folville was no place for him, and that the sooner he left it the better. The May morning's air of adventurous invitation convinced him, unreasonably perhaps, that something was bound, before very long, to determine his future. "I shall go back to London at once," he told Miss Minnet, "to collect my things and get rid of those expensive rooms."

"I'm sorry you can't stay here, Jim dear," she said; "but I suppose you're right. I hope you'll always remember what I told you yesterday: if ever you're in need of a real home or a true friend you'll find them both here. There's just one thing I want to ask," she continued mysteriously, "if you'll promise me not to be offended."

"Of course he wouldn't," he told her.

"I've been wondering," she said shyly, "if you have enough money for your immediate needs, because, you see, if you haven't, Jim dear, it would be such a pleasure for me . . ."

Jim thanked her, smiling. Her diffidence was as touching as her generosity; it would be like borrowing crumbs from a church mouse to take money from Miss Minnet. "I'm quite flush at the moment," he told her. "My rent's paid till the end of the month, and I've nearly ten pounds left over. All that worries me now is how to get in to Melton. It seems queer not to have Ernest waiting at the door for me with the dogcart, doesn't it?"

Miss Minnet put her finger to her lips. "Let me see . . ." she reflected. "Why, surely, it's Melton Market to-day. The Cold Orton carrier will be passing the door, and Clara can stand in the road and stop him for you. But we shan't have much time," she went on. "You'd better go straight upstairs and pack your bag while I cut you some sandwiches for the journey. The van will be here in exactly seven minutes. Mr. Pears is always punctual."

She hurried to the kitchen, while Jim packed perfunctorily. Before he had finished, the maid came scrambling upstairs to tell him the carrier was waiting. He was glad to avoid protracted farewells: there was only just time for one short embrace on the doorstep, a few hurried words of thanks. He swung his bag into the back of the van amid baskets of butter and eggs and dressed fowls and ducklings, and climbed to the friendly carrier's seat. Mr. Pears touched up his horses; they moved forward obediently. As Jim turned to wave to Miss Minnet, he saw, to his surprise, that she was running after them like a little black dog.

"Your sandwiches!" she gasped. "I'd quite forgotten! Can you catch?" She threw him the newspaper packet feebly; he leaned out, caught it and thrust it in his pocket. As they swerved round the corner past the Castle gatehouse, he saw her still standing in the middle of the road, looking after him, a tiny black figure with clasped fingers. He gave her a final wave of the hand; then the turn of the roadway hid her.

"This is the last of Thorpe Folville for me," Jim thought, as they jogged along. It was curious that the hours he had spent at Rose Cottage seemed not to count; this new leisurely motion directly continued the journey he had begun when he had crossed the Rubicon of red brick at the door of The Grange. Once more he had the sensation of entering a new compartment of life, of having left for ever the one into which, over the selfsame road, he had been carried eleven years before, a sleepy, bewildered child, at the back of the yellow-wheeled dogcart. One after another, their order reversed, the old landmarks greeted him: the Essendine windmill on the right; on the left the slim, tapering spire of Leesby Church. "I am living life backward," he thought. "Where will it take me next?"

And that unanswerable question now filled him not with dread but with high, adventurous hopes. A new world invited him. In the space of the last three days the aspect of the country had changed; the green flame had quickened in the hedgerows; the last drifts of blackthorn had vanished like thawing snows beneath a sun that flooded the foxy gorses and king-cup hollows with gold; lambs basked in the fields, as white as new-blown daisies, under a pale blue, cuckoo-haunted sky, and timid foals trotted clumsily to the shelter of their mother's swishing tails as the van rolled past. Such a lustral tide of life, of youth, of hope, swept through the morning air that, entering Jim's blood, it washed clean from his mind the memory of the mounded clay in Thorpe Folville churchyard and the heaped flowers withering upon it, as the pure sea cleanses and smooths polluted sands. It was Pears, the carrier, who recalled him from this sublime unconsciousness.

"I don't know what we're going to do without your grandfather, Mr. Redlake," he said. "He was more like a friend than a doctor, in a manner of speaking. Day or night, wet or fine, the old doctor was always in harness; and whatever he said—and he spoke up rough sometimes, mind you—you could take it for gospel truth, which is more than you can say for most of us, parsons included."

A good epitaph, Jim thought; no man could have wished for a better.

"I suppose," said the carrier, "you'll be taking up the same line? It's to be hoped that you will; folk don't fancy strange faces in these parts."

Jim evaded the question. As they reached the station the engine of the train stood steaming impatiently at the platform. He made a dash for it, thankful that he had a return ticket in his pocket. The guard waved his flag and they started; the houses on the outskirts of Melton thinned and vanished.

"The next stage!" Jim thought. All that day his memory persisted in following life backward, retracing it, step by step, over the ground he had covered when his mother had brought him to Thorpe. The compartment in which he sat might have been one in the identical carriage which she had chosen for their flight. Its smell was the same. In the corner opposite to him there sat a gaitered farmer who might well have been an elderly version of the red-bearded man whose tobacco smoke he had feared. "Only, that day," he thought, "we changed at Market Harborough, while this carriage will go straight on to London. To London," he thought, and his mind shrank from the idea of the vast, hostile city that stonily awaited him with its cruel reminders of Cynthia. "I shall escape from it if I can," he thought, "as soon as I've settled up my affairs in Lupus Street. That sounds easy enough! . . . But God only knows where I shall go."

"Market Harborough!" the porters were crying through a thunder of rolling milk-cans. They stood a long time, Jim thought, at the platform; he supposed they were waiting for a connection. The train shunted, with a jolt. Were they going to stay there all day?

At last they started. "This is where I break with the backward journey," he told himself.

A collector appeared and asked for his ticket. He examined it gravely. "I suppose you don't know, sir," he said, "that you're in the wrong train?"

"But this is all right for London?"

The man shook his head. "You're in the through carriage for North Bromwich," he said. "You'd better go on there now and pay the difference. It won't be very much, and you don't lose no more than an hour if you catch the next London express. You'll just do it if we run in to time."

After all, Jim reflected, he wasn't in any hurry. His time was his own. With a whole new life before him, a few hours wouldn't make much difference. In the meantime he eagerly took up the backward clue again, recognizing, or persuading himself that he recognized, the streams and woods and villages he had seen eleven years before. On the outskirts of North Bromwich the train stopped for a signal; some minor mishap had blocked the network of lines that led to the Midland station.

"If I can possibly catch the London express," he thought, "I'll do so; but if we miss the connection, I ought to go out to Sedgebury and have a look at the Dove's Nest."

His train was sixteen minutes late; the express had gone. He laughed to himself. That means Sedgebury, he thought. He carried his bag to the parcel office and gave directions for it to be forwarded to Euston and delivered at Lupus Street. When this was done his spirits rose like a balloon that has dropped its ballast. He was hungry, but, rather than untie Miss Minnet's sandwiches, which might be useful later, he entered a bar near the station and lunched on bread and cheese and a pint of cider.

"Now for Sedgebury," he thought, as he stretched his legs on the inviting pavements. Even in the heart of that sooty city the air tasted of Spring. "I may as well walk out there," he thought, "by the Halesby Road. It's weeks since I've had any real exercise."

He set out cheerfully westward, with the sun on his left. The city streets gradually gave way to the smug, suburban villas of Alvaston embowered in lilac, laburnum and pink-spired chestnuts. In one of these houses, they were all so alike that he could not distinguish it, George Redlake's first Egeria had lived.

The road climbed gradually; the air began to take on a thin, mountainous quality. The sun crept round and down till it dazzled him, shining through an atmosphere from which the smell of green spaces came to meet him. From the crest of the tableland, at Tilton, he saw beneath him the wide Stour valley, a brimming basin of green that ebbed away northward to lose itself in the smoky confusion of the coal-measures. Full in front rose the twin fir-fringed summits of Pen Beacon and Uffdown, sweeping down in a lovely curve to the Stourford woods, the debatable land of Cold Harbour, neither green nor black, and beyond, the bleak Sedgebury ridge, crowned with the skeleton head-gear of an abandoned colliery.

The moon was up, the sun setting, as Jim neared the home of his childhood. Through the boughs of stark beeches the tall, narrow windows of The Dove's Nest gave back to the west a blood-red reflex, as though the house were on fire. The drive wound its way through overgrown shrubberies; its surface was slimy with patches of vivid green moss, and strewn with deep drifts of unswept beech-leaves. Paint peeled from the sooty stucco; the walls looked leprous as a plane-tree in January. Awe filled Jim's mind as he made a circuit of the house. It seemed uninhabited now—with good reason; for the wall of the front was cleft by a fissure where the bricks had yielded to some subterranean strain imposed by the pits below. The glass in the windows of the room where, Jim thought, he had spent his last night at Sedgebury, was broken. It was hard to believe that anyone—least of all himself—had ever lived there.

It was chilly on this side, where the bulk of the house rose between him and the sun. With a shiver he skirted the flank of it, emerging into a red glare that revealed a prospect of stupendous breadth and splendour which, strangely enough, he had never noticed as a child. At his feet hung a low-lying veil of sulphurous smoke, soft and dense as a sea-fog, through which, like the funnels and masts of ships lying at anchor, rose the smoke-stacks and furnace-towers and hauling-gear of innumerable factories and collieries. It was under that eternal pall of suspended carbon, Jim thought, that Starling had first seen such light as is vouchsafed to the millions that breed there. What wonder that the tang of its acids, the grit of its smoke was in his blood? Through that hanging veil the groups of sooty barracks which its victims inhabited were only discernible as cubes and rectangular lines imposed on a plain of seared grass and cinder-patch. But when he lifted his eyes from those grim flats, Jim saw above the black pall, rising fold beyond fold, a welter of molten mountain-tops, dissolving and flaming in the crucible of the west: the whole heaped wildness of the March of Wales, stretching so far that none could say where mountain ended and sea-born cloud began. The fires of this apocalyptic spectacle dazzled his eyes; its beauty choked him. And, as he stood blinking at it, a new idea tempted him. This journey backward might be continued still further. It was from those remote hills of the Radnor March, near a village called Lesswardine, that his mother's ancestors, the Delahays, had sprung. It was no use, he decided, going back to London with his mind in its present state of rank disorder. "I can think it all out as I walk," he told himself, "or, perhaps, if I walk without thinking, things will straighten themselves out." It was fortunate, he reflected, that he had shed his luggage in North Bromwich.

At the prospect of this new adventure the weariness that had weighed on him as he climbed the Sedgebury Ridge vanished entirely. The sun sank, as he turned his face westward again; but the period of dark was short, being tempered by an invisible moon that rose behind him as he crossed the black heathery expanse of Kinver Edge, beyond which an unknown, enchanted region awaited him. There were goblin orchards of birch, with trunks like slim pillars of silver, whose twigs threw moon-shadows, a tracery of Indian ink on the primrose sand. There seemed actual warmth in the moonlight, as Jim felt when he lost it, descending into a deep lane, hazel-screened, where heavy odours rose from the sap of trampled bracken-fronds, and dead leaves muffled his steps. Then the moon burst out again on a silvery meadow that sloped to some invisible stream. There, the hunched figures of rabbits were feeding in dozens. At his footfall they scattered reluctantly with odd little leaps that displayed their white scuts. A gloom of high timber received him. His heels rang hard on a metalled road. The woods were full of vague nocturnal noises; the rustle of big birds flying through them, owls, he supposed; a snapping of twigs, and, once, the squeal of a rabbit caught by a stoat or a snare. Then the land rose in low hills again.

"When I get to the top of them," he thought, "the view will be marvellous." Yet, as the hedgerows retreated, admitting him, finally, to a bushy wilderness of high common-land, there was no view at all to be seen; no more, indeed, than a bare expanse of moon-blanched grass, through which a white road, its track unmarred by anything but the progression of his own distorted shadow, stretched onward with a mysterious purpose to which he could only submit. It was a freakish road. No sooner was the plateau of common-land passed than it shrunk to the dimensions and character of a water-course, plunging downhill in a series of dizzy swoops and irresponsible contortions, flinging him out, at last, into a blinding reach of metalled mainroad, too smooth to be true, beneath which the hillside fell scattered with cottage-roofs and smoking chimneys that nestled amid billows of apple-blossom. From the nearest cottage an odour of frizzling bacon tempted him; he had neither eaten nor drunk since he left North Bromwich, perhaps six hours before. "This is a good place to sleep in," he thought, "if I can find an inn."

A young man came swinging along through the moonlight with a jaunty air. He wished Jim a brisk good-night with a singing intonation. "Going to meet his girl," Jim thought. "What's the name of this village?" he called.

"Upper Arley, sir. That's Arley Castle you see just beneath you. You'm too late for the ferry, though, if you're wanting to cross to-night."

"I suppose there's a pub of some kind?"

"A hotel," the young man corrected him. "You can't miss it. It's close to the ferry. Good-night, sir!" He hurried on his way. "Well, thank heaven it's not far!" Jim thought; for the momentary pause had made him aware of his tiredness. He hobbled downhill. A moment later the Severn came into view; a silent, swift, solemn stream, spanned by a cable from which the floating bridge swung. The lights of the inn beckoned brightly. Jim entered and asked for supper and a bed. He had no idea what time it was.

"Where am I, and why the devil am I here?" he asked himself when he opened his eyes next morning: the first part of the question answered itself as, gazing from the window, he saw the ferry bridge swinging in mid-stream with a cargo of white-faced Herefords on board. The answer to the second part was less obvious, on the surface almost fantastic: "Because I got into the wrong carriage at Melton and missed my connection at North Bromwich. What rubbish!"

As he sat down to breakfast he was conscious, more powerfully than at any time since his parting with Cynthia, of a new, if illusory, sense of freedom. The symbolism of the red brick Rubicon had been reinforced by another, more powerful, in the shape of his abandoned luggage, now finding its way toward Lupus Street. The pleasant dining-room of the inn gave on to a lawn that sloped to the Severn's green flood. The landlord, whose manner and appearance vaguely reminded him of the Major's, came in and gossiped. A prime morning, he said; these bright, dry days, they always reminded him of his service in South Africa; he had served in the Imperial Yeomanry in the Boer War. Yes, that was a country if you like! He often wished he had stayed there. And he showed Jim a photograph of himself, a smart young sergeant in a yeoman's slouched hat with three ribbons on his breast. Jim asked him if he was a Shropshireman. Not he! "I'm real Brummagem!" he boasted. "Worked for years in Astill's Brewery." What was more, he knew next to nothing of the country beyond the river. His business, Jim would understand, kept him chained to this side.

"You don't happen to know," Jim asked, "of a place called Lesswardine?"

No more than the name of it, he admitted. He reckoned it was somewhere near Ludlow. "But I'll tell you what," he said, "I've a map in the bar that a gentleman left here by accident last week. If you'd like the loan of it, you're welcome. You can post it back when you've finished with it."

It was a ragged Bartholomew reduction of the Ordnance Survey. Jim fell on it eagerly. He soon spotted Lesswardine, a small village spanning an upper reach of the Teme; but, try as he would, he could not remember what his mother's ancestral home was called, till suddenly its name, staring him in the face, brought everything back to him. *Trewern.* He had heard it often on his grandmother's lips, when she spoke with pride of the Delahays' obscure family history. Trewern, that black dot on the mountainous brown of Clun Forest, represented the ultimate bourne of his backward pilgrimage. If he started at once and walked hard all day he might reach it that evening.

With the map in his pocket he crossed the ferry and set out westward through another brilliant morning alive with bird-song. The heaven was roofed with the torrential trilling of skylarks; from the scrubby oaks that fringed the Forest of Wyre the reedy notes of woodlark and willow-wren mimicked each other, and tree-pipits soared ecstatically to drift downward with fixed wings in a twittering parabola; from every dry wall the frightened redstarts fluttered their fiery tails. The sun had passed the zenith when, on the far side of Teme, he flung himself down at the edge of a wood where sheeted blue-bells lay like pools reflecting the tree-shadowed sky, with the red roofs of Ludlow and its grey perpendicular tower at his feet.

Lying thus, drugged with fresh air and the odour of hyacinth, the back of his journey broken, he surrendered himself to the somnolent midday mood, watching, through half-closed eyes, the curve of the climbing road and the figures of wayfarers less leisured than himself who trudged painfully past him. There were many, for this highway, though unimportant in itself, made a bee-line between two workhouses frequented by tramps, and a steady disjointed drift of human wreckage flowed past him; some bold, almost swaggering in their gait, with challenging contemptuous eyes; some old and decrepit, too bowed down with fatigue and misery to notice him. It was one of these, a little old man with a bushy white beard and tattered boots, whose resemblance to his grandfather suddenly aroused Jim's somnolent mind to sympathy. He trudged on his way with a tapping stick, looking neither to right nor left, and his hungry eyes reminded Jim of Miss Minnet's packet of sandwiches, still unopened, and dry, no doubt, in his pocket. He produced them hastily and called to attract the old man's attention; but the tramp, unable, or perhaps unwilling to hear, passed on with his tapping stick, as though he feared that the rhythm of his progress, once broken, could not be recaptured.

"Well, I'll give them to the next one that passes," Jim thought, as he laid the neat packet aside; but now the stream of wayfarers seemed to have been broken, or at least suspended; the long road lay empty, and his mind, vacant too, was invaded by the cares to which he had denied admittance before. He saw himself as he actually was at that moment, with hardly a tie in the world and, but for the possession of youth, in not much better case than the tramps who had hobbled past him. This road, which he had hitherto followed so confidently, led, actually, nowhere. If the world lay before him, it was not an encouraging world. It had been all very well to boast to Miss Minnet that he could make his own living. How and where was he to make it? Assuredly not by lying here on the edge of a bluebell wood in the dove-haunted noonday!

Once more he asked himself the questions he had posed and glibly evaded that morning; and, this time, the obvious answer presented itself in two words: Marcus Hinton. It seemed almost as if some wise instinct of prescience had moved the banker to suggest that the time might come when Jim would be glad of his help. "If medicine becomes quite impossible to you," he had said, "I might find something else for you." Well, medicine, for reasons very different than those they had imagined, had become impossible. "To-morrow," Jim thought, "I'll go back to London and talk things over with him. Now that I've come so far, I may as well visit Trewern."

He was aroused from these reflections by a sound of crunching wheels and hoofs. The road was now occupied by a long cavalcade of gipsy vans and carts, a whole tribe, trekking westward from their winter quarters in the Black Country to the wilder regions of the March where they plied their craft of basket and clog-making in summer. The caravans rolled slowly past him with the leisurely pace of a string of camels crossing the Libyan desert, or as their forefathers, Jim thought, had first migrated over the steppes of Asia. Their live stock marched with them, a herd of shaggy, ill-nourished Welsh ponies and yellow lurchers. In the rear a matriarch, of unguessable age, walked grimly, dragging after her the skeleton of a dog with a rope round its neck.

"Poor brute! He's the very one for my sandwiches!" Jim thought. "But if I give her the packet, this old hag will eat them herself."

As the woman and the dog approached, he untied the newspaper. An envelope fell out of it, addressed to himself in Miss Minnet's handwriting. It was lucky, he reflected, as he signed to them to stop, that he had untied the parcel.

"That poor brute looks half-starved," he said. "Would he eat my sandwiches?"

"He'd eat anything," the old woman laughed. "Not that it 'ld make any difference. He's got the worms, he has," she cheerfully explained.

"Come along, then!"

The animal fell on the sandwiches ravenously with a timid look, as though he expected to be kicked for his pains. The old woman, meanwhile, stood gazing greedily at Jim. She was even older than he had imagined, with a nut-cracker, wrinkled face, so uniformly dusky that he could not guess where dirt ended and pigment began. Her eyes were as bright and rapacious as a sparrow-hawk's.

"I'll tell you your luck for sixpence, gentleman," she said, with a toothless ingratiating smile.

"Luck, granny? I'm afraid I've not got any," Jim laughed.

The cur had bolted the sandwiches; he whimpered and sniffed, asking for more. Jim shook his head. "All finished!" The old woman snatched at the cord. "Come your ways!" she said, addressing the animal, apparently too disgusted with Jim's disbelief in her powers to say any more to him.

Jim smiled as she went. It was lucky, in any case, that he hadn't given her Miss Minnet's envelope. He opened it. Inside the first was another and a folded letter.

Dearest Jim (he read),

I hope you won't be offended with me. I had always intended leaving you this little nest-egg, so it makes no difference. Please take it, with my love, and don't trouble to thank

Your affectionate

Edna Minnet.

The smaller envelope contained ten five pound notes. He was certainly lucky in one way! But for chance either the gipsy or the old tramp would be marching away with it at this moment. He re-read Miss Minnet's pathetic letter with tears in his eyes. Poor, gentle soul! Of course he couldn't take her money. He would write and return it to her as soon as he got to London. In the meanwhile, luck or no luck, it was time to be moving if he were going to reach Trewern that evening. "I'll give myself five minutes more," he told himself, taking out the morning paper which he had bought in Ludlow. There was no news of any importance; the King's Coronation; the death of "the great Lafayette" on the stage of an Edinburgh music-hall; a new murder in Cardiff. In this solitude how unimportant such things seemed! The social column? He had finished now with all that. Yet, as he mechanically glanced at it, a familiar conjunction of letters caught his eye. What he read was this:

The engagement is announced of Mr. Julian Hinton, of 192 *Berkeley Square, to Lady Cynthia Folville, only daughter of the Earl and Countess of Essendine.*

His eyes dazzled, hardly believing the words they read. Cynthia? Julian? But why, why had neither of them told him a word of this? On the very day when she had shattered his hopes on the way toward Dorchester House this cruelty must already have been arranged! Julian was coming to town, Marcus Hinton had said, for some dance or other. It was then, no doubt, that they had settled it.

He could think no more. A kind of madness seized him that compelled him fiercely onward over the road to Lesswardine. All his wordless bitterness was concentrated now on the thing which he vaguely regarded as Julian's treachery. He could never forgive him . . . never. And in this flame of unreasoning resentment the idea of appealing for help to Julian's father was consumed and went up in angry smoke. He would starve, he told himself, before he would be beholden to anyone connected with Julian. The name was obnoxious to him. He hoped he would never hear it again!

Through all the green evening he stalked on like a brooding madman. He walked so violently that the sweat poured from him and soaked his clothes. He was not aware of it, nor even of the surpassing beauty of the tumbled land through which he passed; those solemn woodlands, bedecked with the rich carpeting of Spring; the domed hills that they covered; the clear brooks that came babbling out of their folded silence; the grey, ancient mountains which hung, like massed thunderclouds, athwart the mysterious West. Some unconscious remnant of will must surely have guided his bemused footsteps; for when evening fell, he had crossed the bridged Teme at Lesswardine and passed on, through the gathering dark—for the moon was not up—over stonier tracks that wound into the heart of the mountain massif. By this time, had he known it, his appearance was that of a haggard spectre. A deep instinct of self-preservation had begun to whisper to him that he should go no further, when suddenly, with a novel sensation of relief, he perceived at the base of a triangular green begirt with poplars, the lit windows of a house that looked like an inn.

"I must sleep here," Jim thought, "or lie down for a while at any rate."

In the smoke-clouded air of the bar a number of men were talking loudly in an accent which seemed more nearly akin to that of Leicestershire than the soft speech he had heard of late. The benches were so crowded that he could find no seat. He leaned up against the doorpost, breathing heavily, conscious of a painful stitch in his right side. "Mrs. Malpas!" somebody called. "There's a customer waiting!" And the landlady hurriedly pushed her way through the drinkers and asked him what he wanted. She was a severe little woman, grey-haired, with a tinge of yellow. Her tight-fitting black costume, her piercing eyes, and a certain hard distinction of feature, all reminded Jim of his grandmother.

He said that he wanted a bed. She pursed her lips and shook her head firmly. The house, she explained, was full to its extreme capacity with cloggers—the men with the North-country accent who were drinking in the bar. What was more, he wouldn't find a single vacant bed in Chapel Green, which, apparently, was the hamlet's name.

"Well, what do you advise me to do?" Jim gasped.

She shrugged her shoulders. The best thing of all would be to go back to Lesswardine. If he had come that way he must have noticed the Delahay Arms, by the bridge; a house, she implied, more in keeping than hers with his type of guest. Otherwise—and the prospect as she disclosed it was not inviting—she could only suggest two possible inns, each more than five miles away: one at Bleddfa, the other at a place called Llandewi Rhyddithon.

"I'm looking for a place called Trewern," he explained. "I don't know if you've ever heard of it."

"Trewern? Of course I know it. I belong to these parts. The house has been empty for years; though, now that I come to think of it, I fancy I *did* hear something about somebody having took it.

It's out of our range, like; and there isn't an inn there," she added. "Llandewi's the nearest to that."

"Five miles, did you say?" Jim enquired, with a sinking heart.

"Yes, five miles. Rather less if you go over the hill—say three and a half."

"Is the path plain?" he asked.

"Oh, it's plain enough if you know it. You go up the lane here and take the first stile on the left."

Jim thanked her. He supposed there was nothing else for it. He asked for a whisky and soda.

"We've no spirit licence here," she said primly, as though she were proud of it. "Only beer and cider."

"Well, give me a pint of beer then."

He drank it down greedily; a sweet, heavy liquid, that smelt and tasted like treacle diluted with water. Still, its mild alcoholic content whipped up his spirits, and he faced the tramp to Llandewi with a lighter heart.

By this time the moon was up. Mist, too, was rising, lying milkily in each rush-speared hollow and trailing like torn fleece along the broken hedges of bramble and thorn. The path beyond the stile seemed, at first, fairly clearly defined; but the hillside over which it ascended was steep as a house-roof, too steep, indeed, for his pumping lungs, which stabbed his right side with every forced inspiration.

Up and up the track climbed, till Jim doubted if his waning strength would carry him much further. Then, suddenly, where a broken line of posts appeared, the wire that sagged between them tripped his feet and he shot forward into a huge expanse of open moorland, dead-black with unflowered ling. Its emptiness, reaching far beyond the limits of sight, at that moment grew even more desolate; for dense anvil-shaped heads of cloud engulfed the moon, and his only guide to the track was an occasional steely gleam of peat-water that lay in pools and ruts on its soaked surface. The air of this upland was colder than that of the valleys. It moved in an icy draught from the west, penetrating his sweat-sodden clothes to the skin, so that, even in spite of his exertion, his body grew colder and colder.

Three miles and a half, the woman at the inn had told him. Surely he had struggled much further than that already? Yet the surface of the moorland showed no more variation than if he had been tramping in circles for the last hour. "Perhaps I have lost the path to Llandewi," he told himself, "and hit on another." That theory seemed plausible enough, for the trail which he followed now was fairly well defined by the water that squelched in the ruts over which, he surmised, peat-carrying carts had passed. "And even if this misses Llandewi," he thought, "a cart-track must surely lead somewhere. If it's only a barn, I'll take shelter there for the night. I can't stand this much longer. Why didn't I take her advice and go back to Lesswardine?"

That question was futile now. The night had grown so dark that, even if he had decided to do so, it was doubtful if he could ever have found his way back. A bank of dense mist or cloud descended and enveloped him. It was only by the splashing of his feet that he could now dissociate the track from the surrounding waste of heather. His heart gave a sudden, wild throb. Out of the mist in front of him, two towering forms emerged. To his hallucinated mind they took the shape of gigantic human figures, until, drawing nearer, he saw that they were actually a pair of gateposts, each surmounted by an enormous ball of carved freestone which he had taken for a head. They must mark, he thought, the entrance to some large estate. But the walls that should have flanked them were absent, and no gate hung between them. There was something about these derelict signs of human ambition even more depressing than the godless waste in which they stood. As he passed between them he became aware of a leafless, wind-writhen avenue of beeches and sycamores, stretching away from the gateposts into the mist in a straight line. He took courage from this to leave his water-logged track, and swerved to the south, downhill, through the alley between them.

"There must be a house at the end of the avenue," he told himself, as he quickened his steps on the downward slope. Of a sudden the avenue ended; and there was no house. Only, by the smooth firmness of the ground, he guessed that some sort of a road went onward. At least it made better walking than the cart-track he had rashly deserted.

On the right a black spinney appeared like a cliff. The road, or the surface that he took to be road, seemed to change its direction. It made straight for the dark wall of trees, and came to a stop at an unperceived gap in its face where an iron gate hung between two upright posts set like sarsen stones.

"This looks more hopeful," Jim thought, as he dragged the gate open against a drift of leaves and entered the wood. If the moor had been quiet, this path was surely possessed by the highest degree of silence; if the sky had been dark before, this tree-shadowed blackness could almost be felt. Its air had the dank, imprisoned quality of the air in a well, all the virtue sucked out of it by the hungry undergrowth below, by the greedy boughs above. Jim was stifled as he breathed it; he felt like suffocating. The trees closed in on the track; low branches swept his face and brambles clutched at his feet. He stumbled on through the dark with the panic of a trapped animal.

Then, suddenly, above the rustle of brushing leaves, the snap of breaking twigs, he became aware of another, and, in that place, an unearthly sound: the reedy tones of some wind-instrument, clarinet or oboe, wandering through the still air. He stopped and listened. Above the quickened beats of his own heart he could hear that tranquil melody, more like the lost ghost of a sound than a sound itself. But the tune itself was earthly enough. It was *Twickenham Ferry*. And the player must be no ghost but a man like himself.

"Thank heaven!" he thought, now laughing at his own perturbation, as he pushed his way onward through the barrier of clutching boughs. The wood ended, at last, in another gate, on the edge of a sloping lawn, beyond which the stone gables and slated roof of a rambling house defined themselves against a background of taller trees. There was no light in its mullioned windows, from one of which, on the ground-floor, the clear tones of the ghostly reed-instrument continued to issue. The appearance of this confused mass of masonry was so surprising that Jim stood, continuing to gaze at it. The words of the song attached themselves in his mind to the wavering tune; their swinging rhythm held him, hypnotized him. Then, suddenly, a dog began to bark. The music ceased abruptly in the middle of a phrase. He supposed that if he didn't want to be bitten he had better declare himself. Painfully—for by now he had reached the end of his strength—he staggered down over the lawn to the door of the house. The dog, which was evidently chained, continued its savage barking. Jim clutched at a hanging bell-pull. Inside, a bell echoed emptily. He heard the muttering of some unintelligible tongue; a sound of pattering feet on stone slabs. Then a light appeared, and the door was suddenly thrown open. In the dazzle of a hurricane lamp he saw, or imagined he saw, two figures: a grizzled man of medium height, whose two hands grasped a shot-gun, and, in the darkness behind, the bearer of the lamp, an African negro.

"What d'you want? Who the devil are you?" the grey man asked, sharply. He held the gun threateningly, as though he were prepared to shoot at any moment.

"I'm sorry I've disturbed you," Jim gasped. "I . . . I've lost my way, I'm afraid."

"Why, where do you want to get to?" the other queried sternly.

"I was making for Llandewi."

"Llandewi? You're miles off your road. Bring the lamp here, Elias."

The negro moved forward, his bare feet silent as a cat's on the stone slabs. He held up the lantern to Jim's blinking eyes. The grey man scrutinized him firmly; then, apparently satisfied, lowered his gun.

"You can't get to Llandewi to-night. You'd better come in," he grunted.

"I'm sorry . . ." Jim went on, protesting feebly. "I haven't the very faintest idea where I am." He heard himself panting. For the first time in his life he felt he was going to faint.

"Well, this is Trewern, if that makes you any the wiser," the grey man answered.

Jim stared blankly. "Trewern?" he gasped. Then the light of the lantern appeared to explode like a bursting rocket. In his ears there was a roaring sound through which, with a curious disinterestedness, he seemed to hear: "Good Lord, Elias! Catch him! The poor devil's going to faint!"

And that was all.

VIII. *Trewern*

EVEN for a young man as strong as Jim was, an attack of acute lobar pneumonia is no joke. He had, as the slang of the moment went, "asked for it." His sedentary life during the last six months had been a poor preparation for the double emotional strain of Cynthia's rejection and the lamentable scenes which had surrounded his grandfather's deathbed at Thorpe. On the top of this he had lowered the remains of his resistance by the unusual physical effort of a forty mile walk. It was a matter of sheer good luck that the final collapse had deposited him on the stone flags of the hall at Trewern rather than in a moorland ditch.

The case, in which Jim himself had not even the faintest interest, ran a course of typical violence: four days of high fever and delirium, followed, on the fifth, by a crisis that brought down his temperature abruptly to normal and left him, soaked, and as feeble as a new-born kitten, in a state of bewildered half-consciousness which bore the same relation to ordinary life on earth as that of some elementary creature crawling on the floor of the sea.

His sudden return to sentience found him strangely incurious; there was so little life left in him that he had neither the strength nor the wish to enquire what was happening. He accepted the food and drink with which they plied him, the sound of strange voices, the unfamiliar shapes and sights and smells, as an equally mysterious extension of the timeless delirium in which he had been living: a world in which the most unlikely people—such as Cynthia and Miss Moger, Lord Essendine and the Major, Miss Minnet and Lady Elizabeth Purefoy, were arbitrarily but quite reasonably associated against a background of gipsy caravans, black moorlands, railway carriages, and the Thorpe Folville churchyard. These figures, indeed, were familiar enough; but there were others which puzzled him: that, for instance, of a tall, imperious woman in a stiff white apron, who leaned over his helpless body and bared his chest and back to be pummelled by a black-bearded stranger, or gave him sips of stuff that tasted like brandy; another, that of an elderly man with a grey-bearded face, whose black eyes and clear-cut features had the trick of dissolving and changing into those of his grandmother; and a third, that of a negro in a woollen Balaclava helmet, who moved, like a busy ghost, behind all the others.

It was in the middle of the sixth night—though as far as he was concerned it might just as well have been the first—that Jim finally came to himself and found himself lying in the middle of a Tudor four-poster bed, so massive that its canopy nearly touched the low ceiling of a room crammed to suffocation, as it seemed, with black oak furniture. At the bedside, her lined face illumined by the pale gleam of a floating nightlight, sat the white-aproned woman whose vaporous shape had taken part in his dreams. She appeared to be sleeping in her chair, yet, as he gazed at her, became conscious of his scrutiny and turned to him anxiously. He tried to speak; but his tongue stuck and his voice was a whisper.

"I'm thirsty," he managed to articulate at last.

She nodded and put to his lips a thing with a spout like a teapot's. "Don't try to lift yourself; just swallow," she whispered.

Lift himself, indeed! It was as much as he could do to swallow. The stuff tasted like milk. He had no idea that milk could taste so heavenly. Only why did she take it away from him before he had half finished? He was still so dry that he could have drunk a bucketful. With his tongue now moistened he found just enough strength to protest.

The nurse shook her head calmly. "You can only have a sip at a time."

"I suppose I've been ill?" he asked.

She nodded; then put her finger to her lips, enjoining silence.

"I've never been ill before," Jim murmured.

"Don't talk," she told him firmly. "Try to go to sleep."

Yes, that wasn't a bad idea. There were so many things he wanted to know, and yet it tired him to think of them, even without finding words and putting them into questions. He tried to turn over, but couldn't. If he were as helpless as that, he might just as well submit. He closed his eyes, and soon slept as he had never slept before.

Next morning, when he awoke, the room was white with daylight. The man with the black beard was leaning over him.

"Well, young man," he said, "so you've had a good night? That's splendid. I shan't disturb you much. Just run over his chest. His back first, please, nurse."

Jim felt the pressure of blunt fingers on his ribs, the cold rim of a stethoscope. The doctor percussed his chest and grunted with satisfaction as he listened. His voice was a deep, rumbling bass.

"First-rate!" he said. "Splendid! The lung's clearing up magnificently. Ah, youth, nurse, youth! That's the thing! Don't we know it?" She smiled.

"I'm hungry," Jim said.

"Hungry, are you?" the doctor laughed. "Well, that's a good sign. You've a lot of leeway to make up. You've been through it, young man; but now it's all over, thank heaven!" He turned to the nurse: "Is Mr. Delahay about?"

The sound of the name made Jim jump. Into his clearing mind another came quickly. Delahay? Trewern? He was beginning to understand. "No, no, I'm too tired to work it out now," he thought.

"Yes, here he is, doctor," the nurse was saying. And there, at the foot of the bed, his figure framed by the massive oak posts, stood the grey man whose features, in Jim's dreams, had been confused with his grandmother's. He smiled down at Jim with a vague, benevolent aloofness.

"He looks quite different this morning," he said.

"Ah, there you are, Delahay!" The doctor turned and shook hands with him. "Looks different? I should say he *was* different! He's come through all right, thanks to you." The grey man smiled and shook his head diffidently. "He's young and as tough as a horse," the doctor went on. "Your only job now, nurse, will be to feed him and keep him quiet. Don't let him get talking too much, that's the great thing at present. Good-bye, young man. See you to-morrow!" He patted Jim's shoulder friendlily, and the two men passed from the room.

Jim closed his eyes gratefully. He didn't want to talk. He just wanted to surrender himself to a sleep that was not a nightmare. It was almost worth while being disturbed, when he took in the food with which they plied him, to enjoy the rich pleasure of falling asleep again afterwards. At one time her place at his side was taken by the negro; but though he belonged, by rights, to the other, nightmare dreams, Jim took his presence for granted, being too weak to question it. He must have slept long before the nurse reappeared; for when next he saw her the window curtains were drawn and the nightlight burned at his bedside. She counted his pulse and took his temperature. "Still normal!" she said. "We shall have you up and about in no time at this rate. Would you like some beef-tea?"

"Yes," he answered her eagerly, "I'm ready for anything now."

She laughed, and the sound of that laugh seemed to give her a new reality.

Up till then she had been no more than an evanescent presence, a figure left over, as it were, from the phantasmagoria of his delirium, projected, like the creature of an optical illusionist, into the relatively stable phase of returning consciousness. She was now, it appeared, quite an ordinary middle-aged woman, with weak, rather kind blue eyes, a quiet, cultured voice, and red, capable hands that were always busy arranging his pillows and sheets, or rhythmically engaged in the crochet-work which they performed mechanically while she kept watch. She seemed so much more human in this new incarnation that in spite of what the doctor had said Jim wanted to talk to her.

"I suppose I've been pretty ill," he said, with a suddenness that made her jump.

"I should think you have," she replied. "You've had pneumonia. But that's all over now. Dr. Hendry says you must sleep." And she laid her red hand on his brow, as though its light pressure could send him to sleep by the suggestion of calm it imposed.

But now Jim was wide awake. "It's no good," he told her. "I've done nothing but sleep for ages. I can't sleep any more."

"Well, as long as you lie quiet," she told him, soothingly.

He tried to obey her; she was the sort of person one ought to obey, he felt; but by now his rested mind was so crowded with questions that it was no use trying to suppress them.

"Is this really Trewern?" he asked.

"Yes, this is Trewern."

"Did I hear the name Delahay?"

"Probably. The house belongs to Mr. Walter Delahay."

"Was he the man who stood at the foot of the bed and went out with the doctor?"

"Yes, that was Mr. Delahay."

"How long have I been here?" he asked.

"You came here just a week ago. But you mustn't . . ."

"I know. But I'm not. I'm keeping quite quiet, nurse. Truly. Do they know who I am?"

"Your name's on the ticket inside your coat-pocket. That's all we know. I suppose you were on a walking-tour." She paused; her thoughts quickly followed a train that Jim hadn't thought of. "Of course," she said, "you are worrying about your people. We can soon put that right. We'll send them a wire to-morrow. Would you like to give me their address?"

It must seem strange to her, Jim reflected; and yet, as a matter of fact, there was nobody in the world at that moment who had the least interest in his fate. "Except mother," he thought, "and she's in Italy; it's no use worrying her." If he told her that, this woman would hardly believe him. He ought to find somebody to satisfy her sense of propriety; yet the only name which came to his mind was that of Mrs. Pooley, and it wasn't worth while bothering her, for his rent, after all, was paid till the end of the month.

"I don't think you need wire to anyone," he said, apologetically.

What on earth would she think of him? It all sounded so unnatural. She would probably imagine that he was a criminal of some kind, a murderer or an absconding bank-clerk. "It's difficult to explain," he went on. "A terribly long story. I think I had better wait until I can tell Mr. Delahay. You see . . . I think we're related."

The nurse looked at him sharply, as though she feared he had become delirious again. "I must take your temperature," she said, in a commanding tone, and she watched him suspiciously as the thermometer trembled beneath his tongue.

"Well, what is it?"

"That's my business, Mr. Redlake. Now you *must* go to sleep. If you speak to me I simply shan't answer you."

"I must talk to him to-morrow," Jim said.

It was not until three days later that the interview took place; for Walter Delahay, once assured that Jim was out of danger, had run up to London for the middle of the week on business and left him in the nurse's charge. During this time Jim's teasing persistence had extracted a considerable amount of information from her. Trewern, it appeared, had actually lain deserted, but for the occasional attentions of a neighbouring tenant's wife, for more than five years—since the death, to be precise, of an old man named Eustace Delahay, an eccentric bachelor and the brother, as Jim was led to imagine, of Mrs. Weston. On his death, the estate, such as it was—and apart from Trewern itself it consisted of no more than a couple of moorland sheep-farms—had passed to Eustace's cousin, Walter Delahay.

"Mr. Delahay was in South Africa at the time," the nurse explained. "He's lived there for years, since long before you were born. I think he must hold a very distinguished position out there from what people say, though, of course you can't trust the gossip of country places. At any rate, when this property was left him he was far too busy to spare time to come over to look at it. What's more, I don't think he has any intention of staying here. He complains about our weather, like all colonials do," she added with an air of prim superiority. "In fact, though I must say he's most considerate, you'd never take him for a man who's been born and bred in England. However, that makes no difference to your luck, nor yet to his kindness. If you'd come to Trewern a week earlier you'd have found nobody here. As it was, from what Dr. Hendry says, they only just caught you in time. It was touch and go, I can tell you. Why, if he and Elias had had a proper hospital training they couldn't have dealt with you more wisely than they did. Hot blankets and water-bottles and going off to fetch the doctor at once. Relation or no relation, you owe your life to him, and don't you forget it!"

There was no danger of his doing so, Jim told her. At that moment, with the shadow of death behind him, and the rich, anticipatory wonder of convalescence permeating his mind, life of itself seemed more precious than at any moment since his parting with Cynthia. He had needed some catastrophe, some sudden break in the continuity of existence such as that imposed on him by his days of delirium, to restore his sense of proportion. To all intents and purposes he had died and been born again in a humbler and wiser incarnation; and this near acquaintance with death, whose black imminence had blotted out the minor shadows of wounded pride and disappointment, had left him with an exultant determination to get to grips with life as it was, and to make the most of it.

On the evening of his return from London Walter Delahay came to visit him. In his relatively smart town clothes Jim would hardly have recognized him for the somewhat shabby figure his feverish fancy had painted on the night of his arrival, or the dim, evanescent presence whose soft comings and goings had haunted his delirium.

Walter Delahay, though much taller than his cousin, Jim's grandmother, resembled her not only in feature but in the physical distinction which, perhaps, was all that remained of his race's original aristocracy. His eyes had the look of a man accustomed to command and to be obeyed. His features, as regular and finely-chiselled as hers, were more rugged and desiccated; the skin about his black eyes wrinkled by fierce light, his cheeks darkened by a permanent pigmentation that seemed more than skin-deep. His voice, though that of a man of culture, was coloured by inflections that seemed alien to Jim's ears, accustomed to the polite cockney of conventional English. His movements, even in this house of which he was master, were spacious and awkward, as though he were accustomed to freedom on a wider scale—as though the stiff collar at his throat and the narrowness of the low-ceiled room cramped not only his body but his spirit—and this circumstance gave him an air of ungrateful constriction, as that of a man who uneasily awaits the chance to expand in a more natural element; so that, while it was impossible to write him down as anything but a "gentleman", Jim felt that his nature was desirous and capable of expressing himself in ways more extensive than the accepted limits of the word implied. Yet, if he seemed at that moment a thought ill at ease in Jim's company, there were no reservations in the charm and kindliness of the smile that was visible between his grey moustaches and clipped, pointed beard. There was a frank generosity in that smile such as he had never seen on Mrs. Weston's lips.

"Well, how goes it?" he asked, as he sat down at the bedside, thrusting out his long legs as if by way of a protest. "I needn't ask that. These three days have made all the difference."

"I want to thank you," Jim began.

He laughed a strong, ringing laugh. "No, no, you can cut out all that! Spoken thanks don't cost anything, do they? In any case I've got all I want when I see you looking so different. You looked like a spook that evening. After all ——" There was mockery in his voice—"what else could I have done? Shut the door in your face? If you'd been a lousy sundowner I couldn't have done anything different. In my country you get plenty of that sort—chaps that call themselves prospectors and *bijwonners* out of a job. As it is . . . well, I gather from what you've been telling the nurse—thank *her*, if you like, she deserves it—that your coming to Trewern wasn't quite an accident. You were intending to land here anyway. Isn't that so? Well, you landed here sooner than you expected, and just in time. Very fortunately for you, young man, as things turned out. Had you heard I was here?"

He rapped out the question sharply. Even if Jim had wanted to do so, he couldn't have lied under the scrutiny of those black eyes gazing at him from beneath their bushy grey brows. They fixed him steadfastly as he answered: "No. I hadn't the least idea that anybody was here. I just knew the name of the place."

"Then your visit was—what shall we call it?—a romantic experiment?"

"I wanted to see where my people came from."

Walter Delahay laughed. "Curiosity. Just like me! Well, what do you think of it?"

Jim laughed too. "I've nothing to grumble about, have I?" he asked.

"That's the right sort of thanks. Now we're quits. I gather that we're . . . cousins of sorts. I'm not strong on family history. I've not set foot in England for thirty years. Your grandmother—is it?—is my first cousin, Eustace's sister. He had two, I think. Which one was she?"

"Her name was Jane. She married a Dr. Weston."

"Jane? Yes, now I've got it. I only remember her vaguely. A dark girl, conceited as the devil, but very pretty in her way. I remember she treated me like dirt the one time I saw her. She wasn't my sort. However, that makes no difference. Your father's her son. Is that it?"

"My mother's her daughter. She married George Redlake," Jim added, with the tinge of pride that, in spite of his dislike for his father, the connection gave him.

"George Redlake? Who's he?"

"He's . . . he's rather a well-known author."

"A writer. That's not in my line, I'm afraid. Is your mother still living?"

"Yes. She's separated from my father. As a matter of fact she's . . ." He hesitated. The black eyes flashed on him mercilessly, demanding the truth. "As a matter of fact," he repeated, "my father's divorcing her."

"Divorcing her? The devil he is!" He smiled. "That doesn't exactly sound like my cousin Jane."

"No, it doesn't," Jim agreed. "As a matter of fact it's a very long story."

"You don't want to tell me? Well, you needn't."

"Yes, I do," Jim said. There was something in the honesty, the directness of Walter Delahay, that tempted him to free his heart of this miserable burden for the first time since it had fallen on him. He felt that his cousin was a man of the world; those dark eyes, which let nothing pass their scrutiny, would see everything without prejudice. It was easier, too, to speak of these things to a stranger.

"Well, I'm listening. Take your time. Don't tire yourself," the deep voice said kindly.

For the first time, perhaps, in his life, Jim let himself go. He spoke of The Dove's Nest—his visit to Sedgebury ten days before had refreshed his memory of that dim period—of that fantastic creature the unsuccessful George Redlake, of the North Bromwich Egeria and of the sudden flight to Thorpe Folville. He spoke with a passionate enthusiasm of Dr. Weston and of the plans that the old man had fondly made for his future; of his work at St. Luke's and of the slowly gathering malignity of his grandmother. Finally, with tears in his eyes, he told of the old man's death, the intrusion of Withers, and the shocking scene that had followed the reading of the will. Walter Delahay listened gravely, raising his downcast eyes from time to time to shoot questions so sharply pointed that nothing but the truth could have survived them; he appeared to be examining Jim's story with the concentration of a lawyer considering a brief; but this attitude, for all its keenness, was so kindly that, far from antagonizing him, it made Jim anxious to open the whole of his heart, apart from that one secret chamber devoted to Cynthia which was still too sensitive to be exposed to a stranger's eyes.

"So you came here," his cousin said at last, "with the intention of getting things straightened out in your own mind. Was that the idea?"

"More or less. To tell you the truth I don't know why I came. I just felt sick of everything. I was riding for a fall, I suppose."

"And you got one," his cousin laughed. "What comes next on the programme? Are you going back to St. Luke's?"

"I can't. I must earn some money. I haven't a penny."

"You have fifty-seven pounds and a few odd shillings, to be exact."

"Good Lord! I'd completely forgotten!" And Jim told him the story of Miss Minnet's letter and the "nest-egg" that had nearly vanished with the white-bearded tramp. This appeared to move Walter Delahay more deeply than anything he had told him before.

"You've one good friend, at any rate," he said. "What do you intend to do with that money?"

"Of course I shall send it back to her, though I'm afraid it will hurt her feelings if I do," Jim confessed.

His cousin smiled approvingly.

"You must write and thank her in any case," he said. "As to the money, we'll talk of that later." He changed the subject abruptly. "Do you want to go on with this medical business?" he asked with another shrewd glance.

"It's impossible, anyway," Jim said. "But even if it weren't . . ."

"You wouldn't go on with it. I see. What would you prefer to do?"

"Sooner or later, I know I shall write."

"Like your father?" He smiled rather grimly. "I know nothing about it," he said, "but I imagine that, unless you have luck, that's a waiting game. You're an open-air man, by the looks of you. Of course you can ride?"

"I've hunted with the Thorpe and the Quorn and the Cottesmore," Jim told him with a flicker of pride.

"Well, that's more than I can say." His cousin smiled at him. "Though I've lived in the saddle for weeks on end, I don't suppose I've ever taken a good-sized fence in my life. However, you've talked quite enough. I shall get into hot water with nurse if I stay here much longer. If I were you," he continued kindly, "I should put the past and the future right out of my mind. Just live in the present, and thank God you're alive, my dear boy. I have to run up to London again, worse luck, to-morrow morning, so I shan't see you again for four or five days. Don't forget, by the way, to write to that friend of yours—Miss What-d'ye-call-'em. Just thank her as nicely as you can and say . . . Oh, you'll know what to say. The money's locked up in my safe downstairs. Don't worry about that. Yes, nurse, I'm going at once. I don't think I've tired him. Good-bye, Jim, and good luck! I shall see you again next week."

He went. "You *are* tired, all the same," the nurse insisted firmly. And in spite of all Jim's denials she took his temperature. "If Mr. Delahay hadn't been going to London," she said, "I shouldn't have allowed him to talk to you like this. Do keep your mouth properly shut now!" she warned him, for Jim was smiling at her. "No, it's normal," she said, with what seemed like a tinge of regret, as she punched his pillows into softness and commanded him to go to sleep.

Quite vainly, for temperature or no, his flushed cheeks were the outward sign of a flushed brain. It had been an enormous relief to Jim to rid his mind of so much imprisoned emotion. This rugged-faced, keen-eyed man had taken his confession so calmly; his acquaintance with life seemed so solid and so secure; his attitude so steady and sane, albeit so human (as witness his concern for Miss Minnet's peace of mind) that Jim felt the weight of his own troubles sensibly diminished. Now, weak and light-headed as he was from the shattering strain of his illness, he became conscious of an inherent sense of strength and self-confidence very different from the disorientated, hallucinated mood in which he had set out from Thorpe Folville.

On that day, indeed, he had achieved freedom of a sort; but it was an uncomfortable kind of freedom—the freedom of an unballasted balloon at the mercy of every caprice of wind; detached as a drifting balloon he had been driven westward, to drop down, torn and deflated, at the door of Trewern. Yet, battered and broken as he was, he now had a comfortable feeling that he had regained contact with a firmer and friendlier earth. Not that his future was any less problematic. The change had not taken place in his circumstances, but in himself. He was young, and the more acutely alive because he had very nearly been dead. The width of that deep, unbridgeable river lay between him and his past, and, returning to the hither side, he had found a friend, a man of his own blood and after his own heart.

During their brief encounters, his cousin, Walter Delahay, had made an enormous impression on Jim. Up to this time of his life he had met three men from whose presences, in widely different ways, power seemed to emanate. In the case of the first, Lord Essendine, this quality could be easily explained by the fact that he sprang from a long line of ancestors who took for granted those feudal prerogatives which had never, till lately, been in dispute. George Essendine had been born a viceroy before he was made one. The second case, that of Marcus Hinton, was also reasonably clear. His power, after all, was based on more solid foundations than that of Lord Essendine, and enhanced by an air of quietness—almost of humility—as unaffected as George Essendine's lack of it. The sense of power that radiated from Walter Delahay was much more obscure. He had neither Lord Essendine's sublime inherited self-confidence nor Hinton's commanding intellect. Such power as he wielded had been acquired neither by heredity nor intellectual subtlety, but by the force and directness of his personality and the strength of his will. His power, indeed, had an almost physical quality that showed itself in his parched, rugged features, his piercing eyes, his large limbs—so intolerant of their conventional clothing—and, above all, in his massive hands. Those hands, as Jim now remembered them, spread on his outstretched thighs or clasping his own, offered a curious contrast to Lord Essendine's, which were long-fingered and shapely like Cynthia's, or to Marcus Hinton's pale, mole-like members, with their exquisite sensibility. They were the instruments of a man of action, of pure, physical action, expressly designed for the handling of the obstinate material with which his life had been concerned.

In the meantime Jim gained strength daily. The vague "business" of which Walter Delahay had spoken detained him in London for more than a fortnight, during which Jim recovered so far as to totter away from the nurse's apronstrings and explore Trewern. The home of his fathers was impressive in nothing but its age, being, in fact, no more than a small stone manor-house, ill-shapen and ill-lit, its thick walls and small windows adapted to withstand the assaults of savage weather and half-savage neighbours.

There was something stark, warlike, unhomely, about its stoniness —the grey, flagged floors, the massive furniture of black, smoke-pickled oak. The walls were hung with rusty weapons rather than pictures; the only books to be seen in the locked, glazed cases, were devotional works of seventeenth century divines and a scattering of eighteenth century poetry that betrayed a spasmodic aspiration to culture on the part of some sadly degenerate Augustan Delahay. That impulse, whomever it may have moved, had evidently been rigidly suppressed; for, after Johnson's poets, it seemed that Jim's ancestors had foregone the arts until the paper-backed Dickens and the Victorian drift of green-cloth Tennysons had invaded this outpost of rustic gentility in his grandmother's childhood.

Perhaps those ancestors had been too poor to buy books, barely able (as his grandmother would have said) to "keep up their position." Perhaps they had been absorbed, to the exclusion of all else, in a bitter struggle against the wilds that surrounded them, no longer the Welsh marauders of the Mortimers' days, but the vermin whose savage teeth preyed on their livestock—fox, badger, otter and pole-cat, with whose skins the stone floors were strewn—or the predatory heather and gorse whose blown seeds invaded and possessed their poor pastures and whose flowered thickets invested their marches like the banners of a besieging army. What dreams did they dream, Jim wondered, those men and women whose life now flowed in his veins, when the black winter days closed in on their lives like a vice, and night fell in a noisy fury of wind or the silence of drifting snow? No wonder, he thought, that his grandmother, who had spent her girlhood at Trewern, had a soul that seemed compounded of stone and ice! Why, even Starling's black childhood, he thought, must have been soft compared with this.

But now it was spring and summer in one breath. Until he saw it there, with the virginal eyes of a convalescent, Jim had no conception how sudden and overwhelming that mountain spring could be. One day of still sunlight came, and all the green of the earth burst out to meet it. The stark mountains grew soft as the lambs that cushioned themselves on their thymy turf. High sunlit clouds sailed out of Wales with an air of smiling laziness through a sky in which curlews swooped with liquid whinnyings, or ravens flew superbly homeward with slow wing-beats, or buzzards soared, harrying the upper air with high and cat-like cries. All living things, whether of green sap or warm blood, seemed moved, in those days, by a restless urgency, as though determined, like poets doomed to die, to express in that brief season of ecstasy the essence of all the beauty that was in them. Even to the last glimmer of the long twilight the birds in the garden at Trewern kept up their singing, and no sooner were they silent than the mottled churn-owl began, great beetles blundered through the lilac-scented dusk, and bats fluttered their webs in dizzy hawkings.

Long before night fell a chill, like that of spring-water, crept into the limpid air, so that Jim was glad to return to the house and the heaped wood fires which flared up the vast black throat of the dining-room chimney and filled that dark chamber with a sweet aromatic odour of resin. He would have been content to sit there and surrender himself to the spell of the leaping flames, watching the spark-tracks that twisted like fiery snakes on the chimney's sooty surface, had he himself not been infected with the same eager restlessness, and conscious, pleasant as those moments were, that life was slipping away from him.

His impatience increased as his cousin's absence prolonged itself. The week's visit to London spun itself out into three, before, on the eve of the Coronation, the negro Elias drove down to fetch him from Llandwlas station in the rackety Ford which was their only means of conveyance.

Whatever Walter Delahay's business in town may have been, he seemed glad to be quit of it. His rugged face radiated an air of holiday and relief as they sat down to supper. The silent-footed negro, Elias, waited on them. Walter Delahay ate enormously for so spare a man. Once more Jim had the impression that he filled the room; that Trewern itself was too narrow to contain him. When supper was over he threw the windows wide open.

"I'm hungry for clean air," he said. "There is none in London. How clear the stars are here . . . for England! They're not my stars, though. My stars are Canopus—you can't see him from here—and Magellan's Clouds and the Southern Cross. My sky's like my country, more empty than yours, Jim; but, to tell you the truth, I'm much more at home with both of 'em. That's natural, I suppose. I've known no other for nearly two thirds of my life."

He crammed his pipe with a fill of the dry, dark Magaliesburg tobacco which he carried in a cotton bag with a string round its neck.

Its reek filled the room with a heavy, exotic odour, as, out of the smoke-cloud, his nostalgic reveries took shape.

"Yes, it's just on thirty-four years ago, eighteen seventy seven, that I sailed for the Cape. It was a bit of an adventure in those days; a four weeks' voyage; and the food that we got in the steerage was enough to kill you. When I went there I hadn't the least intention of staying there. The whole thing was a fluke, you might say. I'd had a pretty hard knock. I was mad on a girl who lived near here, and thought she was fond of me. Well, she wasn't. In any case she was much too old for me; but you know—or anyway you'll probably know some day soon—how one feels at that time of life. As a matter of fact she did pretty well for herself; married one of the Powyses, who's now Lord Clun. Well, so have I, though *I've* never married at all. I've not seen her from that day to this; I don't know that I want to; but at the time when she turned me down it just knocked the bottom out of everything. I swore that I'd never look at a woman again—which was rash: in my time I've looked at a damn sight too many of 'em. I just cut my moorings and came down here to Trewern to look up my cousin Eustace, your great-uncle, that is, your grandmother's brother."

He laughed softly, as he re-lit his pipe. "Yes, that's the odd part of it. That's why I've a sort of affection for this place in spite of everything—the climate, I mean: that's really all that's wrong with it. They put me to sleep in the room where you are now. The first night was hell. I can laugh at it now; but, by Gad, I never suffered so much in my life. When I woke in the morning, the first thing I saw on the wall was a sampler—you know, those needlework things. I can see it now: a great map of Africa, all black to show what a lot of heathens there were in it, and signed by Julia Delahay, whoever she was, in 1815. I looked everywhere for that sampler when I came here a couple of months ago. Couldn't find it though . . ."

"I know where it is," Jim told him. "My grandmother has it at Thorpe Folville. It was in my room there."

"Ah; did Jane get hold of it? Well, she can keep it for all I care. The strange thing was this, Jim. When I saw that map on the wall I said to myself: 'Why, I suppose I might as well go there! If it had been South America I should probably have said the same. Anyhow, I borrowed a hundred pounds from Eustace—if you knew what a tight-fisted beggar he was you'd gather that took some doing! —and set off for the Cape by the first boat that sailed. The *Tartar*, her name was. I hadn't a ghost of an idea what I was going to do when I got there. Just to have a look round; that was the main idea. When I landed at Capetown everyone was jabbering about gold. They'd struck the alluvial in the Lydenburg district a few years before.

"Well, that sounded all right; a bit of excitement anyway; so I paid through the nose for a berth on a rotten tub of a coaster bound for the East Coast, got off her at Delagoa, and trekked through the Low Country up to Pilgrim's Rest. As far as South Africa was concerned it was love at first sight. I'd wanted to forget the other business, and the air on the Berg and the light and the space were enough to turn anyone's head and make 'em forget that they'd ever been alive before. But prospecting up there, mind you, in those days, was a pretty tough show. I mean—two pairs of fists were more useful than one. At Koomati Poort I fell in with a Dutchman of my own age called Prinsloo, and we started fossicking about, the two of us, for alluvium in the valleys round Pilgrim's. Our methods were rough and ready, I can tell you. We'd dig down to the rock in some place where water had been, then we'd wash the dirt and smelt the tailings on a shovel over a fire of dry sugar-bush, then separate the iron with a magnet, and amalgamate with quicksilver. He was a sour fellow, Prinsloo, and jealous as the devil. If we quarrelled once we quarrelled a hundred times; but I was pretty handy with my fists in those days, and we stuck it together somehow or other for three years. We were friends till he died, as a matter of fact, and his son Hans Prinsloo's my manager at Schoengesicht now.

"Didn't make any fortune though; only managed to rub along and learn that all wasn't gold that glittered. Just about that time we heard of new finds near Barberton. Well, we wanted a change in any case. You do when you're young. So we set off South again, and—just like my damned luck—I found myself caught up in the first Boer War, eighteen-eighty. When we reached Middleburg Jan Prinsloo had the sense and decency to give me the wink that trouble was coming; so we split up the gold we'd got and I hitched myself on to an English regiment, the ninety-fourth, that was moving South. It was good to hear English Tommies blaspheming again. A regular convoy of thirty waggons we were, a mile and a quarter long. The Boers caught us at Bronkhurst Spruit, about forty miles north of Pretoria. We were moving along as jolly as be damned and the band playing 'Kiss me, mother!' when the beggars opened fire. They'd marked the ranges with stones, you know, and gave us a full volley at two hundred yards! I never saw anyone more surprised than Anstruther, the fellow in command. 'By God, look there!' he shouted.

"We hadn't a chance. Twenty-five minutes finished it, and a dirty business it was. They potted us just as they liked. Old Joubert killed one of his own men who went on shooting when the 'Cease Fire' had sounded. I shall never forget seeing the unwounded men of the ninety-fourth breaking open the cases of brandy. They were beggars for booze! I got hit in the calf myself. I can show you the scar to this day. That was where I picked up Elias. He's never left me since.

"Well, that was the first fighting I ever saw; but I've had a stomachful since. Ten years later I was marching up through Matabeleland to Salisbury with Fred Selous. Then Jameson's Raid. Then two years of the big Boer War . . ." And he rumbled on in his deep, resonant voice, with that queer South African inflection, telling of the first days of the Rand, in the early eighties; of the growth of Johannesburg and the great boom that followed, in which he had made and lost two fortunes; of the men who had risen to wealth or fallen to misery at his side; of the loveliness of that hard land, which, of itself, was worth all his wounds and endurances.

"But I'm past all that now," he said, almost regretfully. "My money can look after itself, if I give it a glance now and then to see that the Joh'burg Jews don't start playing tricks with it. I reckoned that my vine and my fig-tree at the Cape would last me my lifetime. But the doctors won't let me stay there; they say that extremes of temperature down there are too violent for me, though, Lord knows, I shouldn't imagine that Europe's a health resort in winter. However," he went on, "I suppose I shall have to do what they tell me and kick my heels in some place like Cannes with all the other old crocks. My dear boy, I've been talking your head off. You should have been in bed long ago. Good night, and sleep well! I shall smoke another pipe or two before I turn in."

As Jim settled himself to sleep that night he was aware, once more, of the ghostly quaver of the reed-instrument which he had heard on the night of his arrival at Trewern. Walter Delahay sat playing to himself before the fire in the dining-room, and that plaintive strain, so faintly wandering through the summer night, became for Jim a symbol of the solitary player, lost in the wide, lonely spaces of which he had spoken so lovingly. What chance or intention had set free that flood of confidences Jim could not guess; but, chance or no chance, the likeness of Walter Delahay's story to his own impressed him. It recalled to his wondering mind a vision of the extremely solid person of Lady Clun as she had appeared sitting next to him at the Essendines' luncheon table. It was difficult to associate that figure with high romance; to imagine that the bottom should be knocked out of anybody's life by a passion for her. Such were time's ironies. Would time supply, he wondered, a commentary as ironical as that on his passion for Cynthia?

It was strange that even in this remote spot, as in Lupus Street, the clues of chance speech should continue to lead him back to the Essendines; yet even stranger was the coincidence of the needlework sampler, that map of Africa which had been the mute witness of so many joys and sorrows, which he had actually had time to notice as he passed his old room on his way to his grandfather's deathbed. How often had he wished himself away into the middle of its blackness, with the will, if not with the decision, that had carried his cousin to Africa thirty-four years since! It would be queer, he thought, if family history repeated itself. Sheer fancy—and yet, in his present mood of disorientation, sheer fancies had an odd validity. He was dreaming of Africa when next morning, with confusing appropriateness, the soft-footed negro Elias brought in his early tea.

That day Dr. Hendry, in Walter Delahay's presence, said good-bye to him. "You've had a tough go," he told him, "but now I'll give you a clean bill of health. I wouldn't go back to St. Luke's just yet if I were you," he added. "The air of a hospital is always saturated with floating infections, and you'll need a bit of a holiday to raise your powers of resistance. A month of sea air will put you right on your feet again."

Jim thanked him and asked for his bill.

Dr. Hendry smiled. "My dear boy, you're a medical student. Dog doesn't eat dog. But I hope I shan't quite lose sight of you. You might send me your address later on."

"Later on" was fortunate, Jim reflected. At the moment he hadn't got one.

The day was hot, with a moist, steaming sun and a threat of thunder. As soon as the doctor had gone, Walter Delahay dashed off with his usual restlessness on a shaggy Welsh pony to visit a tenant on one of the moorland farms. He rode like a Boer, in trousers and with a stirrup so long that his feet almost touched the wiry heather-bushes; by the standards of Thorpe this man, who had lived in the saddle, was not a horseman at all.

Jim returned to the garden, to the odour of lilac and springing grass; as he sat there thinking and listening to the subdued whimpers of birds which, now that their mating was over, had settled down to the sober business of domesticity, his fancy took flight to London where, under the same hot sky, massed crowds were waiting to see the King drive past on the way to the Abbey. He wondered if Cynthia would go to Westminster. Lord Essendine certainly would be there, regretting the Garter which would have added so much to his uniform on such an occasion; Lady Essendine, too, in the splendour of her jewelled coronet. How distant those pomps and vanities seemed from this quiet garden with its murmur of bees in the lilac, its hushed bird voices, its warm moist stillness through which one could almost hear the sound of green things growing! How remote, and, at this distance, how empty and artificial, seemed that life which, a few months before, he had considered important, with which indeed he had aspired to associate himself! He was delighted to find that he was now, at last, able to think of Cynthia without inviting intolerable pain. His resentment, such as it was, seemed to be concentrated on Julian, and even this, he told himself, was instinctive rather than reasonable, since Julian had done no more than what was expected of him, and, whatever the new life that followed this reprieve might be, neither he nor Cynthia was likely to have much part in it.

That evening, after supper, his cousin suggested that they should take a leisurely stroll to the crown of the moorland and watch the chain of beacons that would be lit to celebrate the Coronation. They walked up slowly to the summit through acres of dry heather, and sat down side by side in a patch of darkness that seemed more intense for the girdling points of flame that flared to the sky down all the long March of Wales. Walter Delahay knew and numbered them one by one, from the Black Mountain northward by Malvern and Clent and Wrekin and Clee to the dominant fire on Black Mixen in Radnor Forest. They glowed suddenly in the black sky like new-born stars, flared out their fierce hearts, then sank to red glow-worm points and vanished. Jim and Delahay watched them in silence. When the last had gone they rose to their feet. His cousin was the first to speak.

"I don't suppose," he said, "we shall ever see anything like that again. You may . . . but I certainly shan't. It's impressive, in a way, to think of these beacons flaring, just like the Armada, from the Cornish moors to the Grampians. They mean more than a Coronation, Jim. They mark the end of an era. This new reign will be very different in England from anything that's gone before. I've been out of the country for thirty-four years, and that makes me able to see it all with a certain detachment. Things have changed a good deal in those years, and I've a feeling that, after to-night, they're going to change much more quickly. The end of one age and the beginning of another. That's what those beacons mean. And now the sky's dark."

Jim heard him. He, too, had been impressed by the moment's significance; but, to him, the future of England seemed less important than the future of that part of England which was himself. The fading of the beacons had marked the end of his youth, the dawn of his manhood. In the fierce draught of those bonfires the vain exaltations and pains of the past had gone up like smoke. Of the old life nothing remained but a smoulder of ashes. A new life beckoned him. Whither . . .?

He could not say. That mattered little, so long as he made a beginning—and the sooner the better. In the meantime he took advantage of the darkness that covered their downward path to give fuller expression to the thanks which his cousin had so abruptly disclaimed some weeks before. This time Walter Delahay received them in silence, almost as though he half expected that Jim would choose this moment for speaking. "To put it at the mildest," he ended by saying, "I owe my life to you."

"Your life," Walter Delahay repeated musingly. "Well, what are you going to do with it, Jim?" he asked in a challenging tone.

"Make the best of a bad job, I suppose," Jim laughed.

His cousin grunted. "It's a bad beginning," he said, "if you put it that way. You've given up the idea of medicine?"

"Entirely."

"Is it money you want?"

"Yes. Heaps of it. But I mean to earn it, not to borrow or beg it."

"How?"

"I haven't the least idea. When I get to London to-morrow . . ."

"Oh, you're going to London to-morrow, are you? Well, that sounds practical. I congratulate you." He laughed in his distant, rumbling way. "Has it struck you that in England, as it is, opportunities are limited; that a young man like yourself can find them more easily in newer countries?"

"Yes, it has. But you've got to get there first. As things are, I can't."

"What about that fifty pounds?"

"I've sent them back to her."

"Good. What would you say if I offered you a job in South Africa?"

Jim hesitated. "I should think you were being charitable, generous, if you like, but rather rash."

"If I told you, on the other hand, that, before you appeared on the scene, I was looking for someone of your age and—what shall I call it?—breeding, for a particular purpose, what would you say to that?"

"I should want to put in for it at once." Jim's heart beat faster.

"I'm offering a three-year contract with fare both ways and a small but reasonable salary. I'm not promising anything at the end of it, though, of course, there's always a future for a man who makes good. That depends on you entirely. What do you think of it?"

"If you think I'm suitable, I'd like nothing better."

"In that case the job is yours." He paused for a moment then asked: "Well, when could you start?"

"Whenever you want me to. To-morrow."

Walter Delahay laughed. "You go too quickly, young man. This country's an island. There isn't a mail boat till next week. The

Armadale Castle. She sails on Friday from Southampton. How will that suit you?"

"Splendidly," Jim told him.

"Very well, we'll shake hands on it."

In the dark their hands met. The gesture was so charged with emotion that Jim could say no more. Fortunately there was no need for speech. He had the conviction that he and this man understood each other without it. They walked on in silence.

BOOK FOUR

THE BLACK MAP

I. *African Farm*

THE American car which Hans Prinsloo, Jim's uncle's manager at Schoengesicht, had driven into Capetown to meet him on the *Armadale Castle* lurched wildly over forty-odd miles of a red-rutted track through the sand-flats that skirted the sickle-shaped curve of False Bay. During all their drive westward, his companion had scarcely vouchsafed Jim a word of polite conversation, much less of welcome. He sat grimly at the wheel, looking straight in front of him, unconcerned, apparently, for his own safety and Jim's or for the mud-plastered car whose tormented springs and chassis squeaked and rattled metallic complaints at his vile usage. This taciturnity was in keeping with Hans Prinsloo's physical person. He was enormously tall—six feet five at least, Jim guessed, but so well proportioned that, except when he towered above him, his body gave not so much an impression of height as of being composed of massive bones and spare sinews without a single ounce of unnecessary flesh. Though he was still under thirty, the skin of his face was almost as deeply wrinkled and desiccated as that of Jim's uncle; but his features, unlike Walter Delahay's, were rudely moulded, as though the power that contrived them had been careless or even impatient of any refinements, concentrating solely on the production of a powerful human machine adapted, like the engine of the car he drove, to withstand the shocks and emergencies of the stubborn natural conditions in which it had placed him.

In contrast to the brute strength of his figure and the rough workmanship of his features, his eyes, which seemed bluer and lighter for the pigmented skin that surrounded them, had the gentleness of a child's, or even, as Jim thought, when this giant stood staring at him in awkward silence, the meekness of some graminivorous animal. It appeared, indeed, that the only reason why he did not speak was the best of all: that he had nothing to say, or, perhaps, that the speaking of English words, which he pronounced with a sing-song inflection and a guttural tone, was an embarrassment to a brain that expressed itself more naturally in action than in speech.

It any case Jim's senses were so eagerly absorbing the strange forms and colours and odours of the new land through which his body was being so perilously and unceremoniously whirled—the flats, with their ramshackle huts and hedges of cactus and aloe; the yellow-skinned half-breeds with smiling Hottentot faces; the blanket-draped Kaffirs with their aristocratic gait and contemptuous mien; the hooded Cape-carts and mule-waggons that gave way and pulled into the ditch with bewildered protest as the car skidded past them; the leafless oak-avenues and prim Dutch houses of a little market-town; an isolated ridge of the mountain, reared like cut cardboard against a stormy sky, and, finally, the park-like basin of Somerset West, green-black with scattered conifers and girdled by the bastions of the Hottentots-Holland range—that small-talk would have seemed inappropriate, even if his tongue-tied companion had encouraged it.

As they reached the outskirts of the village, Hans Prinsloo, cutting a corner at thirty-five miles an hour, swerved suddenly northward over a road even rougher than that which they had left, running straight as a swordcut to the very foot of the mountains, where a forest of European oaks, which at a distance had appeared like some dark moss dankly clinging to the *berg's* tremendous aridity, enveloped the course of a river in thunderous spate.

"Good Lord, we can't possibly go through this torrent," Jim thought, as they paused on its brink with the noise of the flood in their ears.

"I shall risk it," Hans Prinsloo said, as though in answer to his thought. "I knew the river was up. That's why I drove hell-for-leather. It's risen a foot since this morning. If we get stuck in the drift, the mules can drag us out. Can you swim?" he asked, with one of his rare and child-like smiles, as though the prospect of a ducking struck him as great fun. But before Jim could answer he had rammed in the bottom gear, the car took the water and bumped slowly forward over grinding stones. "This'll give her a fine wash-down," Hans Prinsloo shouted above the roar of the waters. His pale blue eyes blazed; he appeared to be enjoying the prank like a schoolboy.

They stopped. For a moment the rear-wheels spun madly, churning the flood to froth that was whirled away as soon as it was formed; then the car gave a lurch sideways; it swayed for an instant as though about to capsize, then jerked forward and staggered safely to land. Prinsloo laughed out loud.

"This river's a devil!" he said—he pronounced it "davel"—"Two inches higher and we should have had to drive round by the bridge, another twelve miles. There's Schoengesicht!"

He pointed. They advanced, slowly now, over a soft drift of leaves. Through an oak-grove of which any great park in Southern England might have been proud, Jim saw the pale gable-ends of a singularly lovely house, whose shape was the only element in this scene that seemed un-English, consisting of two solemn white wings, symmetrically reaching out on either side of the entrance where a central gable rose in a graceful curve. In front of it a long, narrow *stoep* of small bricks made a kind of quay beside which, like a launch skilfully steered, the car came to rest.

The beauty of the house's shape, its repose, its absolute fitness to its surroundings, gave the impression that these had been adapted to it, rather than it to them. And so, in a sense, they had. Its original builder, the sturdy Dutch emigrant, had set up his pile of sun-dried bricks in a virgin wilderness of bush and scrub which resembled, no doubt, the *veld* that still stretched behind it to the sun-blistered *berg*; yet some yearning for homelier greens had impelled him to encircle his raw homestead with plantations of deciduous oak (the acorns piously imported from Holland) and shiny-leaved camphor, whose seeds were brought to him by Dutch East Indiamen laden with slaves from the Spice Islands. Neither he—Van der Merwe was his name—nor his sons, nor theirs, had seen the later glory of Schoengesicht, the vast oakwoods that now enclosed it, the avenue of gigantic camphor-trees that led from the *stoep* to the converted wine-store in which, for the next three years, Jim had his quarters.

From the moment when he first set eyes on it on that stormy July evening, emerging from the watery fury of the drift into its studied serenity, Jim found Schoengesicht friendly and reassuring, perhaps even a little ghostly—more ghostly, certainly, than Trewern, for all its memories of Welsh border warfare. Above and about it there brooded a green silence that echoed to the notes of unfamiliar birds;

the faint land-breeze at dawn came to him faintly tinged with the smell of camphor-leaves; the pungent odour of camphor-wood smoke diffused itself from the fires that the half-caste servants lighted at sunset; in the morning when he returned from his work on the farm, the warming air was penetrated by gusts of early orange-blossom from the groves that Walter Delahay had planted to replace the vines which he had found there. As he approached the *stoep*, Jim would pause for a moment to inhale this enervating perfume; by an imagined association with Italy it always reminded him of his mother; and there, for a moment, he would stand, gazing southward, down a sloping vista that cut through the oakwoods to reveal, in the ultimate distance, a bar of gleaming sea, till the high voice of Katjie, Hans Prinsloo's wife, called him in to his breakfast of glutinous mealie-meal porridge and steaming black coffee.

In person she was almost as ungainly as Hans himself, the big bones and rudimentary features in her case being covered with fat. Though still a young woman and childless, she appeared middle-aged and matronly; but she, unlike her husband, was loquacious and shrill as a parakeet. She would sit brooding all day, like an image of Buddha, in her great armchair of stink-wood, supported by a criss-cross of leather reims, from which vantage-point, like that of a gunnery officer in the fire-control station of a battleship, she shrieked out her orders to the servants in the Cape-Dutch dialect. To them, from the way in which they hurried to obey her, Jim judged she was terrible; to himself, on the other hand, she showed, from the first, an almost maternal tenderness, which was hampered by an ignorance of English much deeper than Prinsloo's, yet seemed fitting; for this huge woman, whose massive modelling resembled that of a primitive Demeter, should surely have been the mother of a brood of sons big-boned and earthy as her husband. Hans, in his rough way, adored her. Their union, indeed, was a strict defensive partnership, unadorned by any of the forms or politenesses of civilised marriage. In all his stay at Schoengesicht, Jim never saw them exchange a caress or a spontaneous word of tenderness; yet in their relationship there was a brooding, elemental quality; they were joined together like immoveable blocks of cyclopean masonry, like the stones of a pyramid, in a union by comparison with which modern marriage, as Jim knew it, if more superficially graceful, seemed fragile and light as a structure of lath and plaster. Like the great mammals of their continent, they understood each other without need of words; self-contained in their isolation, they achieved a unity of thought and interest that seemed based on absolute instinct rather than on conscious adaptation or even on habit.

To Jim, those first days at Schoengesicht had a strange enchantment. His break with every previous condition of his life had been so abrupt, the circumstances that led to it so surprising, that he could almost have imagined the whole adventure an extension of his Trewern delirium, a dream evolved in his subconscious mind from the suggestions of his cousin's black servant Elias. The contours and smells of the country, the strange food, the odd style of the house's architecture, the ancient stink-wood furniture and beaten brass with which its rooms were furnished, the harsh and, as it seemed to him, uncouth language with whose sounds he was surrounded—all these contributed to the sense of unreality in which he found himself.

However he may have regarded South Africa from a distance—and the general impression, derived from his childhood's memories of the Boer War, had made him picture it as a desert diversified by flat-topped kopjies and leaping herds of antelope—he certainly hadn't expected to find it romantic, at any rate in a European sense. He had been prepared to see himself "roughing it" in a raw, new country. He found an old one, more unspoiled (if that were the word), more piously bound by tradition than the changing England he had left. The slave-bell, whose morning clangour summoned the Cape-boys and Kaffirs to work, had flung out its call to the fields for more than two hundred years. In everything but the conditions of labour the routine of Schoengesicht had not changed for centuries. The only difference was that the farm-hands who occupied the shanties and white-washed barracks were now paid men and free. Apart from the Kaffirs, there were few of them whose fathers and grandfathers had not been born on the estate. To compare this with English feudalism—the system whose last strongholds great families like the Essendines were supposed to be holding—was merely fantastic. Indeed, far from finding himself in a raw new country, he had slipped back a hundred years and more in the scale of progress.

But if, in the traditions of his race, Hans Prinsloo was conscious of the great gulf fixed between white men and coloured—and the *sjambok* of hippo-hide which he carried as he sternly stalked or rode, long-stirrupped, over the *veld* or the tilth was not, like his appendix, merely vestigial—his attitude toward "his" Capes or "his" Kaffirs, as he called them, was that of a benevolent patriarch. He was an Old Testament man—Mr. Smit, the *predikant* of the Dutch Reformed Church, had more honour than any other visitor at Schoengesicht—and the relative position and rights of white and black had been established, more or less in the manner of Mr. Jewell, by the Book of Genesis. The children of Ham were hewers of wood and drawers of water in virtue of a divine dispensation; but, this state once admitted, he was ready to treat them with far more consideration than, for instance, a newly arrived and presumably cock-sure Englishman. The coloured people of the farm had a lesser gerarchy of their own: wizened grandfathers, some of them too feeble for labour, who had worked at Schoengesicht since their childhood and were skilled in the strange mixture of knowledge, superstition, and even astrology that composed the tradition of farming at the Cape.

Although Prinsloo considered himself a scientific farmer, and, thanks to Jim's cousin, had taken courses of instruction at the Government's Agricultural School, he was always ready, in practice, to defer to the judgment of these elders, who knew the virtues and defects of every foot of land on the estate; and this attitude of mingled autocracy and deference on his part seemed to Jim not only wise but actually charming; since, harsh though he seemed at times, there was no domestic emergency among his coloured dependents with which Hans, or Katjie his wife, was not prepared to deal with the utmost patience. They settled disputes, they cared for the minor emergencies of sickness, finance and—even more frequently—morals, with an understanding and charity which seemed part of their natural equipment.

Though Jim's own position at Schoengesicht had been clearly defined from the first as in no way exceptional, being that of an ordinary farm pupil on a three years' contract, the fact of his relationship to Walter Delahay could not fail to influence the Prinsloos. When he sailed for South Africa, Jim had not the least idea of his cousin's standing, though hints which he had picked up from strangers on the boat had led him to suppose that it was more important than he had imagined. In Hans Prinsloo's eyes Walter Delahay ranked second only to the Old Testament Deity, because of his loyalty and devotion to Hans' father, his old comrade of prospecting days.

Quite apart from this, Jim gathered that his cousin must be a man of considerable wealth. Schoengesicht, though derelict when he had acquired it, was one of the largest farms in the Western Province; yet Schoengesicht counted as one of the least important of Walter Delahay's possessions. Not only did he own two other and much larger estates in the mountains of the Northern Transvaal and the tropical low-country beneath them, but his interests, Jim learned by degrees, were scattered through every industry in the country. He had platinum claims, large holdings in gold mines on the Rand, in Rhodesian asbestos and copper, in coal and in diamonds; and indeed, in a country caught up into a fury of industrial development, such as this one or mid-Victorian England or late-Victorian America, the man on the spot of normal intelligence finds it difficult to avoid the accretion of wealth. Walter Delahay's intelligence, in fact, had been more than ordinary; it had shown itself, among other things, in his careful avoidance of the spectacular; and the power which he wielded was possibly more effective from the fact that it was not advertised; that, save in financial circles, its extent was but vaguely realized in South Africa, and in London, where he passed for a mere rough-and-ready Colonial visitor, hardly at all.

In the neighbourhood of Schoengesicht Jim found himself accepted not because of his cousin's wealth but because of the man's known character and personality. On Sundays, the Prinsloos, who, as far as the work of the farm was concerned, were strict sabbatarians, drove him out in the car, which, after its washing in the drift, had soon recovered its protective colouration of mud, to visit a number of farms which lay hidden in the fertile lands at the foot of the mountains. Each of them had its own particular graciousness and dignity, for all were examples of that style which flowered, so unexpectedly, at the Cape in the Eighteenth Century: the finely carved gables, the white symmetrical wings, the peerless proportions of windows and window-panes. Through all those dark woodlands of oak their luminous shapes were threaded like pearls on a string. Their very names were music: Meerlust and Morgenster, Rhone, Vergelegen, Paarl Valee. And the folk who inhabited them, many in the fourth and fifth generation, seemed impressed by the gracious dignity that surrounded and, indeed, informed them, being courteous and hospitable to a degree, making no surrender of a pride which differed from that of the Essendines because it was based not on privilege but on consciously modest achievement, yet resembled it in a certain racial exclusiveness which implied that their unquestionable loyalty to the same crown as Jim's was a concession of their own free will and never a meek subservience. In Jim's presence they always abandoned their native speech for the sing-song, stilted English that Prinsloo spoke. This compliment subtly marked the distance between them and their guest. Even later, when Jim could speak and understand Afrikaans, they shook hands at arm's length, so to speak, by this expedient.

Yet his neighbours, black or white, and the houses they inhabited were of less importance to Jim than Africa itself. From the moment of his arrival at Schoengesicht its wistful and alien beauty had taken possession of him. By the end of a few months the letters which he received from England—from his mother, whose decree had been made absolute and who was now happily established in Wimpole Street with Dr. Fosdyke; from Miss Minnet, timidly detailing the Thorpe Folville gossip, Aunt Margaret's engagement, Lucy's approaching marriage, the Essendines' departure for the Delhi Durbar, and hoping that he wasn't rashly exposing himself to wild beasts, snakes and tropical diseases; from the Major, who knew "those parts," and informed him that Self, Partner, and Miss Moger were all "in the pink"—seemed, each of them, to have as little connection with the planet he now inhabited as a meteoric stone. His flexible youth was easily moulded to the new circumstances; his time so filled, his interests at once so absorbing and exhausting, that it was an effort to recapture the flavours of his former life.

The mere physical effort of keeping up with the pace set by Prinsloo's iron strength, of matching the feats of endurance which he performed so easily, taxed all Jim's powers. The manager was up at dawn; he worked till sundown; then ate, smoked a pipe of coarse Boer tobacco, and passed through a stage of mute lethargy to the appropriately enormous bed he shared with Katjie. Even when the spring days lengthened, the hours of labour were governed by the sun. That sun, which at first Jim had welcomed as a friend, now became an enemy. Through the moist spring air it burned as through a lens's refractions. Its glare never relaxed save when the South Easter blew; a devil of a wind that came hurtling in savage gusts through the budded oak-woods with a thunderous booming sound, as though the full sea had broken its bounds and were charging inward to crash in foam on the face of the Berg, whose craggy line, on those days, was wreathed in torn shreds and gigantic spoutings of cloud. During those fierce assaults the air was charged, as by friction, with electricity; the skin pricked; the nerves were strained to a painful sensibility; the earth lay helpless and blanched; it seemed to cower and cling to its rocky foundations, while the white wind raked its surface, snatched up in its passage dun clouds of the soil it had dried to dust, and whirled them away, as in spite that mere humans should ever have dared to till and plant it. Then it seemed to Jim that it was not for nothing that this tawny land was hided like a lion. Its nature was violent, untamed, untamable. Its very passionate excess of beauty was savage.

Yet, when the South Easter passed, and it rarely blew for more than three days, the earth relaxed and stretched itself luxuriously, like a lion that has ravened and gorged and lies down lazily with one amber eye open, relapsing at last into sleep. And then, just as if they had lain in hiding, waiting for this quiescence, the creatures of the spring would timidly creep forth again and, gaining courage, abandon themselves to the passion of growth.

Already, earlier in the year at Trewern, Jim's imagination had been wooed by the tenderness of a northern spring. In the African spring there was no tenderness. It swept over him with an almost brutal violence, suffocating him with its perfumes, as all the orange-groves burst into waxen flower; dazzling his eyes as the oak-leaves darkened from gold to green, as the hedges of pomegranate flamed with vermilion and the tasselled maize shot shoulder-high, and orchards of apricot buried the hills in drifts of snow-white blossom. Underfoot, the red *veld* cracked to let through the swords of gladiolus and green spears that burst in a night to disclose strange flowers, shaped like irises. Innumerable bushy varieties of protea thrust forth their sinister thistle-heads. In the hot swamps bordering the river a blue broom raised rigid crests that swayed beneath the light weight of yellow finches and scarlet-breasted honeybirds whose flight slashed the air with streaks of living malachite. Even in the dead of night this new ferment of life declared itself in the ceaseless welling of perfume, the shrilling of cicalas, the monotonous whistling of frogs in the irrigation channels to which, in the heat of noon, the wakened cobras writhed down in search of drink. The Kaffirs laughed at the snakes, the Cape-people dreaded them.

Such a prodigal flow of sap in that rainless season must surely have drained the earth of its last drops of moisture. Without water the standing crops and blossomed fruit-trees would have withered as swiftly as the *veld*. In this period all hands on the farm, Jim included, were busy from dawn to sunset with the dams and channels that carried irrigation water to thirsty roots. Already the flow of the river slackened, the trout sulked in the pools; where once the drift had foamed and roared, white stones lay bleaching. As summer advanced, Hans Prinsloo stalked the farm with an anxious air.

"That river," he declared again and again, "is a devil! You never know where you are with it. In winter it keeps you awake all night, expecting to see half your farm washed away in the morning. In summer it's as much as you can do to keep your stock alive, let alone to irrigate. I've told the big *baas* a hundred times that it's a gamble to grow lucerne. It's as much as we can do to water the mealie-crop. If he loses money it's not my fault."

Between the mountains and the coast there were half a dozen farms whose life, like that of Schoengesicht, depended on the river's caprices. To all of them water was gold, and the theft of it a crime next to murder. So, jealously guarding their intake, Jim and Prinsloo, would work for long hours in the blistering light, driving cattle to water, opening one channel, damming another, through which this vital fluid might penetrate to the roots of the orange-trees, the dry-rustling maize, the lucerne, that now stretched in sheets of intolerably vivid green. And the sun beat down unceasingly. Even the air at night blew off the baked land like the breath of a brick-kiln. Of the profligate flowers not one remained; the *veld* was so parched, so bathed in the swimming heat which radiated from every rock, that it seemed vain to hope that any green thing could ever spring from it again. Like the face of a desert it stretched from the *berg* to the edge of the oak-woods where Schoengesicht lay, an oasis of heavy green, under the bleached sky. Then a new bird came:

a kind of small cuckoo which perched in the oak trees and camphors and sang monotonously his song of three notes. *Piet mijn vrouw . . . Piet mijn vrouw . . . Piet mijn vrouw . . .* Katjie Prinsloo mimicked him: "*Piet mijn vrouw—Maak nou gow.* That's the Christmas bird," she told him. Its maddening monotony was like that of the aching sky.

At Christmas, in spite of the heat, there were great junketings. The young Afrikaners would ride or drive forty miles for the sake of a dance. Jim went to half a dozen with the Prinsloos, but, with the best of will, felt rather out of the picture, which resembled, in fact, certain festive interiors by Breughel that he had seen at the Hintons' house in Berkeley Square. Their sheerly physical expression of holiday humour was still alien to him. The shadow of William of Wykeham brooded over him; and though some of the girls were pretty in a generous blond way, and, as far as he was concerned, of a propriety beyond reproach, he couldn't—normal as his instincts were—imagine himself falling in love with any one of them. The delicate, Greek refinement of Cynthia set impossible standards; these big-boned, full-breasted lasses had no place on a Grecian vase. Their movements reminded him rather of the double basses in the *scherzo* of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Nor, for that matter, could he ever persuade himself that it was really Christmas, as his thoughts went back to the crisp, cold air of Thorpe Folville, to the brittle ice that had crackled under his feet, to Miss Minnet's wheezy organ and Mr. Jewell's sermon.

At one of these rustic dances, however, he had a surprise. Among the company he thought he espied the red, blue and brown of an Old Wykehamist tie, and was appropriately indignant at the outrage implied by it, for the wearer was more roughly turned out than any of the local gallants. In the interval between two dances, however, he came up to Jim. He was a stocky, blunt-featured young man, with a fair moustache and puzzled blue eyes.

"Isn't your name Redlake?" he asked, in a voice and accent that seemed as much out of keeping with his appearance as the colours he was wearing. "You don't remember me? Mine's Furnival." He blushed as he spoke; and Jim, searching his memory, did remember, vaguely, not his face, but his name. Early in his days at Winchester he recalled a scandalous sensation of the moment in one of the other houses which had ended with the abrupt disappearance of three boys older than himself.

"My people buzzed me out here five years ago," Furnival was saying apologetically. "That's what they call 'giving one a chance.' Well, here I am. I loathed it at first, but I'm getting on finely now in partnership with a fellow near Stellenbosch." He laughed nervously. "I say, Redlake," he went on, "about that business at Winchester: I shall be awfully obliged if you just won't mention it to anyone. You're the first person I've met out here who knows anything about it. When I recognized you it made me jump as if I'd seen a ghost. I damned nearly did a bunk on the spot for fear you should see me. Then I thought that'ld be a rotten, cowardly thing to do. When they told me you were at Schoengesicht I knew we were bound to knock up against one another sooner or later. So I thought . . . well, I thought, the fellow's a *sahib* after all. He won't give me away."

"Why, of course," Jim began . . . Furnival shook his head impatiently:

"No, I knew quite well that you wouldn't; but, at the moment that made no difference. When a fellow's been trying his hardest to forget a thing for five years and then, all of a sudden. You remember that rotten business . . ."

"Honestly, Furnival, I hardly remember anything about it."

"Well, thank God for that! But, look here, I want to explain. I know I made a damned fool of myself, but—oh, what's the use of it?—I didn't realize what I was doing. I'm not really a bad sort, Redlake. I'm quite different now, I swear; and I'm making a decent job of it. You ask anyone here." His intense anxiety was pathetic.

"I'm glad you spoke to me," Jim told him. "You know, I should never have recognized you."

"Well, that's one comfort anyway," he laughed, rather bitterly. "I'm booked for this dance. See you later!"

Toward the end of the evening he approached Jim again. By this time he appeared to have regained his lost composure. He had been drinking rather too much of the local wine, and became sentimental.

"I've been thinking about Winchester all evening," he began. "In spite of the mucker I went there, you know, there's no place like it for me. Once a Wykehamist always a Wykehamist, I say.

Now isn't that true? Meeting you has brought it all back to me as if it was yesterday." And he began to talk of the Titans who had dominated the Winchester scene in his days. "Weren't you friendly," he asked casually, "with that tall, dark fellow, awfully good cricketer, Hinton?"

"Yes, Julian was a great friend of mine."

"I thought I was right. I saw the announcement of his marriage in the paper the other day. My partner, who's a South African, a Haileybury man, gets a lot of them sent out to him. He doesn't *know*, by the way: I may just as well mention it. What *was* the girl's name? Lady Cynthia something or other. Lord Essendine's daughter, I think. A great swell anyway. Had you heard of it?"

"Of course I knew they were engaged," Jim heard himself answer. "How steady my voice is," he thought. This triumph intoxicated him so much that he forced himself to go on talking about Cynthia, still wondering at his calmness. "As a matter of fact," he said, "I know the girl quite well. She's terribly pretty."

"And Hinton'll have pots of money. Lucky devil! Well, I don't know," Furnival went on reflectively. "Aristocracy and that is all very well in England; but when you've been out here some time, that sort of thing doesn't count much. When I've made enough money and can find the right girl I shall marry all right; but I'm pretty well sure it wouldn't be one of that kind. Will you come over to Stellenbosch one day and have a look at our citrus? Luipaard's Kloof is the name of the place. I wish you would."

Jim told him that he would be delighted. As Furnival spoke, his Dutch courage had failed him somewhat; the old, haunting fear of a rebuff came back into his eyes. As for Jim, he drove home that night in a state of exaltation. He could never have believed that the announcement of Cynthia's marriage would move him so little. He found that he could even think of Julian now without resentment or bitterness; and this discovery showed him how far the healing of his wound had progressed; it marked another stage in the process of emancipation which had begun more than six months before when he set out for Trewern. This encounter had given him the proof that he needed. He was master of himself once more.

And the land grew dryer and dryer.

Yet, miracle of miracles, out of clay that was baked like a potsherd under a perpetually thirsty sky, their crops came to fruit. The rustling maize-fields rose thick as a bamboo jungle; the full cobs turned golden. In contrast with their dryness the orchards stood all in full leaf, through whose shadow the pointed globes of yellow-skinned peaches and Japanese plums shone like tiny satellites of the sun whose light they had stored. In the long sheds the Cape-people chattered like starlings, packing the fruit; no brown child was too small to take part in this labour of harvest. They sang and they chattered together from dawn till sunset, and Hans Prinsloo's wife Katjie sat throned above them, massive and watchful, a great solemn statue of Demeter, the Earth Mother, at whose feet, like thank-offerings, they displayed the product of the soil's hot abundance. Even when the packing of the fruit was over, the garnering of produce went on: slow mule-teams moving in a cloud of red dust, dragging the feed in which greenness remained to the white silo towers that rose like symbols of some primitive phallic cult of fertility above the clustering byres and stables and folds and pig-pens.

By the time that this labour relaxed, and Jim found freedom to ride over to Stellenbosch on his promised visit to Furnival, the water in the drift hardly covered his horse's fetlocks, and the vineyards of Pearl Valee, whose vivid green plastered upon the burnt bistre of the *veld* had seemed, in that torrid season, to promise his aching eyes a mirage-like coolness, were mottled and streaked blood-red by the fingers of autumn.

"A wonderful country, South Africa," they told each other, as they sat on the *stoep* in the dusk, smoking and talking of old times, of the grey cathedral stones and the Itchen's water-meadows, now chill and misty under the choked light of winter. Their nostalgia here was so faint, so unenvious, that it became a luxury; and Furnival, now that he had conquered the diffidence born of his forgotten scandal, seemed to Jim a pleasant companion, not over-blessed, indeed, with intelligence, but frank and manly, with the kind of breeding whose lack he noticed, but by no means despised, in the Prinsloos. "A typical Englishman," Jim thought, "whatever his past may have been. If he stays in this country till he dies he will still be an Englishman: a man you could trust to play the game in the tightest of corners." It pleased him to think that Furnival and his partner were prospering at Luipaard's Kloof. They made plans to see more of each other in the future.

Then the rains came.

Within twenty-four hours the drift was an impassable torrent; all Schoengesicht an island surrounded by raging waters. Yet what a relief it was! Not only to the parched land, drinking in water with its cracked lips; not only to the cattle whose hides had known no moisture for months but that of the dip; not only to the birds who sang tempestuously on the dripping boughs, nor the few green things left, which seemed to shiver with ecstasy, but to the brown men and black who gazed upward, smiling at the teeming sky with eyes that shone, and bared their lustrous skins to meet the rain as though its cool needles caressed them.

In the middle of the third night of rain, Hans Prinsloo, with a hurricane-lamp, woke him.

"Come quickly," he said, "that damned *duivel's* at it again! The whole farm'll be washed away unless we look out."

They toiled through the rest of that night and for three days that followed, Jim and Prinsloo and every available hand on the farm to the last doddering patriarch, standing up to their knees in brown water, heaping stones and building revetments of wattle and brushwood hacked out of the oak-woods' undergrowth and banks of reinforced clay to stem the fury that poured down unceasingly from the invisible mountains. In every concavity the river had taken great bites out of the land. An irrigation dam burst, tearing channels ten feet deep, exposing the white roots of fruit trees and whirling others away as though they were twigs. One road, which they had proudly and wearily made in the spring, was a rocky watercourse. Another disappeared under the waters of a lake composed of what once had been fields on either side of it.

Hans Prinsloo, his dogged face darkened, rode splashing through the flood from one point to another, like a general confronted by defeat. All the crops which had not been garnered were ruined or lost by now. There was something splendid, inspiring, in the man's gaunt determination. It was for some such emergency as this that the savage elements with which he battled had fashioned his steely sinews, his big-boned frame. His physical strength, if not the power that he handled, was a match for them. Untiringly, in grim silence for the most part, he faced the devastation; and when it was over, and the full extent of its damage appeared, he set himself to repair what he could without an unnecessary word.

"Three months labour wasted," he said laconically. "To-morrow we will set to work on the roads."

The work on the roads and the new series of defences of stone and brushwood and felled trees in the fields that bordered the river was not completed when, in the middle of March, Walter Delahay arrived. Coming from the European winter, he looked curiously blanched in spite of his voyage, far more fragile and frosty than Jim remembered him. It was partly, perhaps, because his grey beard had whitened. Even Elias, who sat behind with the luggage, had a pinched, bleached look. And just as at Trewern, on his cousin's return from London, Jim had thought that his town-clothes looked shabby; so now, in a similar degree but in the opposite direction, he found them far too smart by Schoengesicht standards. After their first greeting Walter Delahay took little notice of him; they met in the capacity of employer and servant rather than as relatives. Jim gathered that his visit, in any case, would be short, his stay in South Africa being concerned with parts of his property more important than Schoengesicht. While Jim went on with his work, his cousin and Hans Prinsloo rode everywhere together, inspecting the damage which the river had done, making plans to resist its invasion in the following autumn. There was talk of new *veld* being cleared and planted with fruit-trees; of new stock being imported for grading, new tractors, new saws, new machinery for uprooting trees, new methods of blasting the land for new plantations. He talked about nothing else at mealtimes, while he gobbled the local delicacies, *bobotjies* and sweet *confyt* and pumpkin made savoury with cinnamon which Vrouw Prinsloo prepared for him. He would often chaff Hans about his caution and parsimony and the gloomy view he took of the farm's finances. On the eve of his departure he walked beside Jim up and down the camphor-tree avenue with long, restless strides.

"Well, how do you like it?" he asked.

"Immensely," Jim told him. "It's a wonderful life. I feel that I'm doing something and seeing the results. I never knew what work was before. That's a new experience for me."

"You like Prinsloo?"

"Of course. And his wife."

"They like you too. That means quite a lot, because you are English, and Hans, as you know, isn't often enthusiastic. Don't take your colour too much from him. He can't understand that when anyone makes as many experiments as we're making here they can't all come off. Some are bound to be failures, and others, even if they succeed, won't show any profit for years. I expect to lose money, in order that other people may benefit by my experience; but if any of our neighbours make sixpence more than we do by sticking to the same old rut, Hans thinks he's betraying my trust and mismanaging the estate. He has a sort of Old Testament conscience which is sometimes a nuisance. If you've any ideas don't hesitate to let me know of them."

Then he spoke of Trewern. "I hardly know what to do with the place. It's lovely for four months in the year, but in winter it's hellish. I've a small house in London now that's convenient for business in the city. Do you think it would spoil Trewern if I reconditioned it and tidied it up, so to speak?"

"I'm not sure," Jim said. "It seems to belong to the past. If it were mine, I think I should leave it just as it is."

Walter Delahay nodded approvingly. "I believe you're right. We're not like the people that lived there; we can't put back the clock. We grow into something different. *You've* grown, by the way. You're much taller than when I last saw you. You're tougher and harder. If I met you in London I believe I should take you for a South African."

"Well, what am I?" Jim asked. "I almost feel like one now."

"So soon as that? Well, well, she's a mysterious country. If you once fall in love with her it's a passion that will last out a lifetime. This is only a bit of her infinite variety. I wish I could take you along with me when I go up north to-morrow; but I know Prinsloo needs you, and I don't want to treat you—how shall we say?—as an amateur. I may call here again on my way to the boat."

But he didn't. It was only through a paragraph in the *Cape Times* that Jim learned that his cousin had sailed for England; and, indeed, time at Schoengesicht was so crowded with urgent activity, that month followed on month and season on season without his being aware of its passage until it had passed. Another spring came with its raptures of bloom and blossom; another summer scorched him with pitiless drought; once more, when the rains broke, they waged their war with wild water and ploughed the huge fields with the tractors that Walter Delahay sent from America, to see the land they had ploughed turn green again, and the mealie-shoots shake out their rustling leaves and shake their silk-tasselled heads in the waxing sun.

It was not till the following winter, in the July of his third year at Schoengesicht, that his cousin reappeared. He seemed stronger and more confident than ever, delighted with the results of their labours: new grades of cattle established, new orchards of stone-fruit coming into bearing, the river, apparently, firmly bridled at last. There was talk of spanning the drift with a bridge of reinforced concrete.

"Do you realize," he asked Jim, "that your contract with me is finished? Are you still wanting to write? Or what are you going to do?"

He always put it like that, and never suggested to Jim what course he should take.

"If you want me to stay on at Schoengesicht," Jim told him, "of course I'll stay. Otherwise, I've been talking with a man from my school who's growing citrus near Stellenbosch, a fellow named Furnival. He'd like to get somewhere further away from Capetown. We've been thinking of the Eastern Transvaal, where land is cheaper. I might possibly go in with him. I have most of my wages saved, and I'm prepared to risk them."

"In other words, you don't want to stay at Schoengesicht?"

"I should like to be more on my own," Jim admitted frankly.

"Well, that's natural enough; and I think it's quite right that you should want to see more of the country. But South Africa's a dangerous place for the small capitalist, Jim. You'll have to be devilish careful, and even then a bad season may ditch you. I'm going up north to-morrow—first of all to the Rand and then to my farm in the Zoutpansberg. You've earned a holiday anyway; so you'd better come with me. That is, if Prinsloo can spare you."

They set off from Schoengesicht next day in a holiday mood. Whatever he may have been in London, Walter Delahay was clearly a personage at Capetown. The stationmaster accompanied him to the four-berth compartment that had been reserved for them. Hans Prinsloo, in his earth-tawny working clothes, towered on the platform. The giant looked singularly helpless and out of place in this urban setting, as remote from the noise and bustle that beat against him as a statue rudely hacked out of the living rock of the *berg*.

"When I come down again," Walter Delahay said as he bade him good-bye, "I hope to God you'll have scrapped that damned rattletrap of a car. I don't want to set eyes on it again."

Hans shook his head grimly. A new car would cost money that might go to his precious roads.

They stayed a full week in Johannesburg, visiting various mines in which Walter Delahay was interested, particularly on the undeveloped eastern end of the Rand, and dining in the elegant houses of mine-magnates and managers. The air of the town made Jim restless. He felt almost as detached from that sort of life as Hans Prinsloo himself. An acute nostalgia assailed him as he saw, in the market-place, the teams of oxen unspanned and the clumsy waggons that had rolled in over the *veld* with their country produce. He was glad when his cousin's business in Johannesburg was finished and they set off northward again by the night mail.

When they awoke next morning the character of the country had changed. In the night they had dropped a couple of thousand feet from the high *veld*. The air was balmy. The low hillsides were scattered with smoking Kaffir huts shaped like beehives; rare plantations of paw-paw and citrus and bananas lay close to the track; but the land, for the most part, was thorny low-veld, of the type that stretched from that fringe of the tropic northward to the springs of the Nile. At a lonely wayside station, where savage, half-naked Kaffirs from the neighbouring reserves stared at them with curious eyes, a two-horsed buck-board waited to carry them to Delahay's low-country ranch. The driver was a typical back-veld Boer, more taciturn even than Prinsloo, with the peculiarly close-set eyes that come from generations of in-breeding. The settled feudal atmosphere of the Cape had been left far behind. This country was as remote and savage as it had ever been, of a monotony, terrible at first, which soon began to exercise on Jim a strange fascination, if only because the least variation was so unexpected. He could have cried out aloud when suddenly there burst on their sight the vermilion flowers of a *kaffir-boom*, lighting the wilderness with a flaming ecstasy too acute to be borne.

At evening they dropped again to a green, lost valley, where a sluggish river stole between banks that were shadowed by silvery wild olive. Vast herds of cattle were grazing there, the beasts that had been driven down from the *berg* to their winter pasture. The manager of the ranch was a cheerful young Scotsman named McLeod, with an accent like Mr. Cortachy's, bursting with enthusiasm for his job and the condition of his stock that were already benefiting by their change from the sour high-veld.

Walter Delahay questioned him. No; he wasn't lonely. His charge kept him busy all day, and at night, if he had any energy left, he could always lose himself, he said, in Sartor Resartus. It was good to read the Philosophy of Clothes in a country where most men dispensed with them. He was intensely proud of the home he had built for himself with bricks baked from the river-mud, old paraffin-tins, and a roof of corrugated iron as well he might be, for the place was as spick and span as a wind-jammer captain's cabin, with his books, his rifle, his shot-gun and his cooking-utensils symmetrically disposed, and a portrait of Gertie Millar, whose type he fancied, to add a touch of feminine grace to his serious surroundings. For a Scotsman, indeed, Jim found McLeod embarrassingly loquacious, till he realized that, in all probability his cousin and himself were the first creatures of his own race with whom he had spoken for months.

"You're not wanting a change?" Walter Delahay asked him, in the tone with which Jim was already familiar.

"Don't speak of it, Mr. Delahay," Mr. McLeod implored him. "I'm getting on fine. This is the first place, mind ye," he explained, "that I've ever struck where it's a physical impossibility for a man to spend sixpence in six months. Ay, there's a lot to be said for it."

Next morning, at dawn, two horses stood saddled ready for them. McLeod rode with them to the boundary of the farm, as though eager to drain the last dregs of human companionship. As they climbed the next ridge Jim turned in his saddle and waved to him. He was still standing, gazing after them, a singularly lonely figure, against the dun *veld* rolling emptily to the bow of the horizon. A strange, remote life, Jim thought. "Could I face it myself?" he wondered. And the answer, without a moment of hesitation, was "yes," and "yes" a thousand times over; for by now the spells of that old enchantress had entered his blood; the face of the *veld*, which at first had seemed blankly terrible, had begun to unveil a little of that sphinx-like African loveliness for which, like the beauty of much-loved women of old, in whose recorded features we search in vain for their fatal power, men of his race, from time immemorial, have recklessly flung away life and comfort and all other attainable loves. This was the Africa, he told himself, for which he had waited; the Africa symbolized by the black-hearted sampler at Thorpe Folville. As he rode on behind Walter Delahay, for the twisting track was too narrow for two horses abreast, his heart was filled with an awed exultation, as when, in real life, one suddenly enters a compartment of time or of space already familiar in dreams.

But now the track steepened. The sea-like expanse of the low-country ended abruptly at the base of a cliff-like range, the foothills of the *berg*. As his horse bravely breasted their summit Jim drew in his breath. Before him, uprising like an impenetrable barrier, he saw the huge massif itself, vastly dappled with shadows—not of cloud, for the sky was flawless—but of the land's own mighty convolutions.

"Go easy," his cousin told him. "You see what's in front of you."

The path, such as it was, hugged the edge of a *kloof* torn out of the mountains' flank. As they climbed, the shagged, grey-green tops of the trees fell away beneath them. In the topmost branches blue monkeys chattered with fright. Then a virgin forest received them into its green gloom. The air was as dense and lifeless as if it had been breathed and rebreathed for centuries. Up, up they climbed, at a painful pace, hour after hour. The sun rose, hung like a hovering vulture right overhead, then swooped slowly westward. When they reached the open at last, emerging, with relief, on a plateau of coarse, sour grasses, the whole world had changed. These high levels seemed verily part of the sky; the air was like crystal; its coolness fanned Jim's flushed cheeks; between his dust-blackened lips it entered like spring-water. The cleansing element penetrated his blood; it went to his head like wine. Even the horses, hard-ridden as they were, became revivified. They tossed their heads, spattering foam, and broke into a sudden canter. The crystal, intoxicating air rushed by;

Jim's eardrums cracked; he became aware of the high, singing note of windswept grasses rustling in the golden sun. It was as though he were being whirled through the sky in Phaeton's own chariot.

But the sun was setting, and the marching gigantic shadows of themselves and their horses lay green against a grassland drenched in rosy light when they dropped down from the plateau through black woods of wattle, that Delahay himself had planted, to the shallow valley of the Sterkstroom which gave his farm its name. They were glad of the meal of home-killed beef and the blazing wattlewood fire that the manager gave them. Yet such was the stimulation of the mountain air that no sooner had they eaten than all their tiredness vanished.

Walter Delahay was as jolly as a schoolboy that evening. This mountain farm of Sterkstroom was the apple of his eye. In that sublime altitude of nearly seven thousand feet it seemed as though the weight of his earthly possessions slipped away from his shoulders. As soon as the meal was over he challenged Jim to stroll with him, in the starlight, to the edge of the *berg*.

"I'm never happy," he said, "till I've set eyes on that view." And as they walked along over the rough farm road through the frosty night, he spoke, with a freedom that since that one night at Trewern had been unusual, of the day, nearly thirty years before, when he had discovered Sterkstroom.

"Jan Prinsloo and I," he said, "had trekked north from Pilgrim's Rest on a prospecting trip. We'd climbed up the face of the *berg* —no horses, mind you! When we got to the top we were both of us done to the world. It was darker than this that night, and cold as the devil. We lighted a fire of sorts and brewed some coffee; then lay down in our blankets and slept. When I woke with the sun, in the place where we're going to now, I had the surprise of my life. I'd no idea there was anything so magnificent even in Africa. All the forest on the face of the *berg* falling away like moss, and the low *veld* beneath stretched out like a map for God knows how far—right down into Portuguese territory. That was good enough to begin with; but when I turned the other way, there was the Sterkstroom valley, unbelievably green, with the river slinking like silver along the bottom of it. I didn't wake Jan. I just stood and gazed at it; and I swore that if I ever made enough money to pay for it, I'd take up that land, the whole valley, and plant a farm there and end my days in it. Well, part of that plan's gone west, like a lot of other things; but the farm's there, Jim; I kept to my oath; and, apart from the fact that stock don't thrive there in winter, it's as good a place as I know in the whole of South Africa. But it's a young man's place. I'm too old for that sort of life now. Still, I never come here without feeling the old excitement. I make it a kind of pilgrimage. And I never see the spot where I slept that night without feeling it happened yesterday. Be careful now! Here we are. We've come to the edge."

The edge of a bottomless blackness; three thousand feet of sheer mountain falling away into blank, unimaginable mystery! The wind had fallen. The air beneath them was still as the air of a well. A single light flickered in its depths, one fire, throbbing yellow, like a star pulsating in the distance of another sky. The silence was awful in the vastness of the space it possessed. That spark of light was the only evidence of life in the world other than themselves, until, of a sudden, their attention was pricked by an unexpected sound—the bark of a dog or a jackal, so faint as to be almost inaudible, proceeding, it seemed, from the same point as the throbbing light.

"A dog, I expect," Walter Delahay said softly. "That fire probably belongs to some native *kraal*. It's so still to-night you might almost hear them talking. Listen!"

They listened attentively. The barking ceased. A single cicala fizzled like an electric spark in the invisible forest below. Then another sound reached them, a hollow, rhythmical thudding, a sound of drums.

"What's the meaning of that?" Jim asked. "Is it a dance or something?"

"I don't think so." His cousin spoke solemnly. "It's curious. I've heard that before in Matabeleland. Twenty years ago. Curious . . . It can't be a native rising; they're quite settled in these parts. Some tribal alarm, I suppose."

"I don't quite understand."

"Well, you see, those drums are war-drums. There's war somewhere. A war that concerns them."

Thus, outpacing in swiftness the white man's magic of charged wires or waves vibrating through ether, wandering through God knows what forests of Congo or swamps of Nile, the news of Europe's suicide set drums throbbing in that Kaffir *kraal* at the foot of the Drakensberg. But three more days passed before they heard it at Sterkstroom.

II. *Men Who March Away*

ON SEPTEMBER the sixteenth, nineteen hundred and fourteen, a policeman, patrolling the Main Reef Road outside Johannesburg, fired, on a motor-car which had disregarded his challenge to stop, the blind shot that killed Jacobus Hercules De La Rey and saved South Africa from the threat of her bloodiest civil war. A week earlier, on the frontier of German South-West Africa, Maritz and his command had deserted. The *veld* was on fire; by October eleven thousand rebels took the field against the Union Government.

Hans Prinsloo, as a supporter of Botha and a member of the Citizen Force, left Schoengesicht at once. Up till the moment of his departure he was busy superintending his work on the road which the last floods had destroyed. He stalked down from the *veld*, his figure ruddy with dust, cast out from his saddle-bags the collection of patent medicines with which Katjie had stuffed them, then rode off through the drift to Stellenbosch to report for duty with a casual wave of the hand for good-bye just as though he were going on a business errand and would be back by bed-time. Katjie's attitude was no more emotional than that of her husband. She also appeared to regard this hazardous adventure as part of the day's work. Even Hans' rejection of the liver-pills and arnica and pain-killer which she had provided so thoughtfully did not disturb her mountainous placidity. With a monstrous sigh she collected her bottles and pill-boxes and waddled back to the bedroom. If that sigh was a prelude to tears neither Jim nor his cousin heard them as they stood on the *stoep* in the soft evening light looking down the long avenue of oaks where the dust that rose from the hoofs of Hans Prinsloo's horse still hung in a golden cloud on the motionless air.

To Jim the very quietness of Prinsloo's departure, his mute acceptance of duty, appeared heroic. He would have given his eyes to ride off at Prinsloo's side; but that, as Walter Delahay insisted, was out of the question at present. His duty, for the moment, was clearly to remain at Schoengesicht, in charge of its six thousand acres of *veld* and tilth. Walter Delahay, who himself was itching to get back to England, but, thanks to their delay in the north, could find no place in the crowded mail-boats, treated his restlessness with sardonic amusement.

"You appear to think that war is a kind of picnic," he said. "I know better. I've fought in three. If it wasn't Hans Prinsloo's duty to go, of course I wouldn't stand in your way for a moment. But Hans has first chance—if you like to put it that way—and you owe it to him as much as to me to keep our end up at Schoengesicht. It's all very well to be patriotic; we know that you're that: but if everyone cleared off and left their farms just to see the fun, as you call it, there'd be famine, which is rather worse than war, in six months. For God's sake be reasonable, Jim. It won't last long, anyway. When Prinsloo comes back you can do what you damn well like."

It was some consolation to know that his position wasn't unique. The same predicament had arisen at Luipaard's Kloof, where Furnival's South African partner had ridden off on the same day as Hans. Without Prinsloo's aid, the business of managing Schoengesicht absorbed all his time and energy; but whenever he could escape, Jim's restlessness drove him over the hills to exchange grievances with Furnival. They would sit on the *stoep* at Luipaard's Kloof gloomily haranguing each other, discussing the scanty reports of the war in Europe that were cabled to Capetown. When the first casualty lists from France appeared in the papers their misery increased, for these were thickly scattered with names of men they had known at Winchester. It was the chance of a lifetime, they told each other, and here they were, grilling in South Africa, as completely useless and helpless as if they had been marooned on a desert island.

"It's all very well," Jim complained. "I know it's our duty to stay here; but how the devil are we going to explain that to people in England?"

There were people in England, it appeared, who regarded his lot as fortunate: his mother, for instance, and Miss Minnet, both of whom wrote telling him in so many words, how glad they were to feel he was safely "out of it." Yet, even they, it seemed, were privileged to serve their country: Miss Minnet still at Rose Cottage, knitting her eyes out; Jim's mother already hard at work in the hospital that Dr. Fosdyke had started. Miss Minnet's letters, in spite of her busyness, were breathless with information: Lord Essendine, naturally, was a general in command of a Territorial Brigade and Julian his *aide-de-camp*; Alec Folville a subaltern in the Royals; Lady Essendine (The Countess, as Miss Minnet persisted in calling her) had established a hospital for officers at the house in Grosvenor Square, where Lady Cynthia Hinton—how strange it sounded!—was helping her; every hunter and hayrick at Thorpe had been commandeered; Lucy's husband was now a chaplain—so handsome in uniform!—and Mr. Malthus was running his parish as well as Cold Orton; Mr. Jewell, whose liver, unluckily, disqualified him for a commission, had taken temporary civil rank as a Rural Dean, and preached *most inspiring* sermons on the nobility of sacrifice; Mrs. Jewell, on the other hand, in Miss Minnet's words, was "more rampageous" than ever: though disqualified by her sex from dying for her country, she was determined that no young man in the district should miss the opportunity of doing so. Of course Jim had heard about the Angels of Mons?

So Christmas came. The rebellion started by Maritz had been stamped and beaten out like a *veld*-fire; but still Hans Prinsloo did not return to Schoengesicht. A laconic, mis-spelt postcard from Kimberley announced that the unit to which he belonged was being transferred, under Brits's command, to German South-West.

Jim possessed his soul in impatience. He and Furnival had thrashed out their grievances so thoroughly by now that they had no more to say to each other. He tried to console himself with the thought that, thanks to his care, the fruit crops and mealie harvest had been successful; though what was the use of growing fruit that glutted the market and would rot before ever it reached Europe for lack of sea transport? Then came the rains and the spite of his old enemy the river, whose fury, thanks to the drains on which he had laboured all summer, left Schoengesicht almost unscathed.

It was not till the end of July, in the middle of winter, that Hans Prinsloo came home. The German South-West campaign was over at last. He rode up, unannounced, to the *stoep* one evening, just as though he were returning from his usual day's work on the farm. It seemed as if, during the day, he had been forced to change horses, for the beast he rode was a cadaverous grey with skeleton ribs. Hans himself had not changed a hair's-breadth, unless, perhaps, he was thinner, his lined face a trifle more desiccated, the enormous bones of his hands and wrists more in evidence. He lurched out of his saddle clumsily, as Jim had seen him do a thousand times, threw the reins on the horse's neck, stamped his feet and stretched his great arms, then bawled out in Afrikaans for a boy to water the horse and feed it and bed it down. It was the sound of his voice, reaching Katjie in the kitchen, that brought her, pale and waddling, to the door at the moment when Prinsloo, in silence, shook hands with Jim.

"Hans!" she cried. "Oh, Hans!"

He looked at her calmly. His childlike blue eyes were full of a mild satisfaction. "I'm hungry. Is supper ready?" was all he said, almost brusquely.

He answered Jim's questions and Katjie's shrill cackle at the table with dry monosyllables. When the meal was over he lit his pipe —the same pipe he had ridden away with, though the broken stem had been replaced by a tube of bamboo. His blue eyes wandered round the room as though numbering its contents with satisfaction. "Who broke that blue jug?" he asked. "It belonged to my grandfather." Then he lurched toward the door and the *stoep*, where Jim would have followed him had not Katjie, with a hurried, wise whisper, restrained him.

"Best leave him alone, Jim," she murmured in Afrikaans.

Hans Prinsloo went out into the moonlight. For a while he stood on the *stoep*; then clumsily descending, he walked, with the gait of a man accustomed to horseback, down the length of the camphor avenue, pausing at the end of it to stand solemnly surveying the moon-pale bulk of Schoengesicht as though silently drinking into his soul its familiar shape, the odour of the orange-blossoms, the still moon-shadows cast on the tawny earth by the camphor-trees' motionless boughs. Jim and Katjie watched him from the distance. It was a holy moment. When Hans slowly returned to the house his eyes were gentler than ever with the look of surpassing spiritual repletion and content that one may see in those of a woman whose travail is over.

"I am going to bed," he said; and Katjie followed him.

Next morning, at daybreak, he took up the work of the farm at the point where he found it, as though it had only been suspended overnight, giving orders to the men and to Jim himself with complete assurance, making no comment whatever on the work that had been performed in his ten months' absence. But Jim understood him. He had never in his life met anyone more simple, more direct, more easily understandable, more utterly devoid of hidden motives or superfluous emotions than Hans.

That evening he hastened to open his heart to Prinsloo.

"I want to go to Capetown," he told him, "to enlist."

"Yes, I thought you would want to do that. When will you go?"

"As soon as you can spare me. There are things that I ought to show you."

"I have my eyes in my head. You can go to-morrow if you like."

"To-morrow? Ridiculous!" Katjie protested.

Hans Prinsloo suppressed her. "He's a man. He knows his own mind. You had better leave him alone. When the war is over," he told Jim, "you'll always be welcome at Schoengesicht, for your own sake now, as well as Mr. Delahay's."

If he had spoken for an hour he could not have said more. They shook hands on it as he rolled off to bed. Next morning he was out on the farm long before Jim started, and Katjie, profiting by his absence, pressed upon Jim the battery of homely medicines that Hans had rejected. It gave her such satisfaction that he had not the heart to refuse them. As he drove to the drift down the camphor avenue he turned and gazed at Schoengesicht with something of the emotion he had imagined in Hans Prinsloo two nights before. How smilingly placid it seemed in the morning sun with its white walls dappled in shadow, the thatch like brown velvet, the still, warm air faintly tinged with the smell of orange-blossom. "I shall always imagine it like this," he told himself. "Perhaps," he thought, "I shall never see it again."

At Capetown they stripped and pommelled him and pronounced him fit. They gave him an ill-fitting khaki uniform and a springbok badge. The sergeant in charge of the squad of recruits was an old soldier recalled to the colours, an Englishman named Steel. Among his loutish companions Jim found it easy to shine. Sergeant Steel congratulated him. Where had he learnt his drill?

"At Winchester," Jim told him, "and in camp at Tidworth Pennings."

"Tidworth Pennings? My gawd!" said the sergeant. "I know it like my own backyard. It's a first class station, Tidworth. Jellarlabad Barracks. My regiment was there for a year."

"What regiment?" Jim asked.

"The Leicesters, sir."

The "sir" slipped out unawares. Jim lived to regret it; for the sergeant, proud of his position relative to Jim's, adjusted the unfortunate balance by inflicting on him a series of fatigues that made the difference in their military rank only too painfully clear. The period of training was a short one. The men took it for granted that they would be drafted into new battalions bound for Europe. It came as a surprise, and to many of them as a relief, when one morning they found themselves "issued", as Sergeant Steel described it, with tropical kit. Two days later Jim and twenty of his companions were shot off on a tramp-steamer, with a cargo of cattle and numerous other "details", to Walvis Bay, and thence to Windhuk, the capital of German South-West.

He might just as profitably, he told himself, have stayed at Schoengesicht, if his part in the war were to be no more than that of frizzling as a sentry outside cages of German prisoners. He wished the Germans joy of their place in the sun. In his frustration he sent off feverish letters to Walter Delahay in London, imploring him to use whatever influence he had to get him transferred to some kind of active service. It seemed possible, he suggested, that since he was English and had served in the Officers Training Corps at Winchester, he might be considered a fitting person for a commission in the Yeomanry. It seemed as if these appeals must have been lost in the sand of German South-West or torpedoed on the way home. In those days sailings were so irregular and mails made up with such arbitrary caprice, each civil department apeing a military mystery and autocracy, that one never knew how, when—if ever—or by what route letters would be sent. The first hint of a reply came, not in the shape of an answer from Delahay, but in an apparently casual order for Corporal Redlake—he had gone up in the world!—to report at Capetown forthwith.

The word "forthwith" was a little joke on the part of G.H.Q., Capetown, from which Jim was separated by approximately eight hundred miles of desert. In practice it meant that he had to wait there another month, arriving in Capetown early in April. At the Castle he presented himself to a fat little Major in the Garrison Artillery with a face as red as his tabs. Jim showed him his orders; but the Major could do no more than stare at them with childlike wonder and scratch his bald head. When he had done this for several minutes he called for his staff-sergeant. "D'you know anythin' about this feller, staff-sergeant?" he asked despairingly.

"Let me see, sir," the staff-sergeant said, with a fatherly smile, taking the document from his chief's plump fingers as one might remove a knife from those of an idiot child. "Redlake . . . Redlake . . . " he repeated. "This—er—gentleman's been gazetted second-lieutenant on the General List. We had orders about him a month ago, if you remember, sir."

"Oh, *that's* it, is it?" said the major, greatly relieved. "In that case I suppose he'd better get some uniform," he said, with an air of triumphant ingenuity, as though by this decision he had displayed administrative genius.

The staff-sergeant took Jim aside. "If I were you, sir," he said, "I should draw it on payment from ordnance. You get an allowance, you know."

"And, I say—er—Redlake, you'd better report here again this afternoon."

Jim saluted and left. The uniform he drew from the ordnance was not elegant; yet it gave him a thrill of pride, when re-crossing the parade ground, to receive the salute of his old friend Sergeant Steel, who was still engaged in putting the fear of God and the regular army into a squad of recruits. He found the gunner redder than ever at his desk. Lunch had wiped away every memory of Jim from his childish brain.

"Oh, Redlake . . . yes, Redlake," he said. "Of course. I remember." He spoke as though this were an unusual feat. "Let me see, now." He screwed up his eyes with an air of extraordinary cunning. "Yes, Redlake," he repeated proudly. "I've been *thinking* about you. Have you had any experience of machine-guns?"

Jim told him he had taken a course of machine-gunnery at Windhuk.

"That's splendid. Staff-sergeant!" His solicitous nurse appeared.

"Staff-sergeant, this officer's just what we're wanting. Machine-guns. The *Balmoral*'s sailing to-day?"

"This afternoon, sir. I really doubt if there's time . . ."

"Time? Time?" said the major irritably. "Phone down to the harbour at once, and say that an officer's joining her. Then make out a voucher and I'll sign it. Perhaps you'd better go down with Mr. Redlake yourself. You can make out his orders to the O.C. troops as well."

When they reached the quay, the *Balmoral Castle* had already hauled up her ladders and swung away from it. The staff-sergeant commandeered a boat. Jim crawled up a Jacob's ladder; his kit disappeared through a hole in the liner's grey flank. His orders, which the staff-sergeant forgot till the last moment, followed him. Jim presented them at once to the O.C. troops on board her, another gunner, a grey, middle-aged man whose face bore signs of the hammering he had known on the Aisne.

"Very good," he said. "You'll report to the Base Commandant at Durban."

"At Durban, sir?" Jim gasped. He had boarded the ship under the impression that she was sailing for England; and here he was, it appeared, on the way to German East Africa!

The great liner was almost empty of passengers, for, at this stage of the war, sailing permits were hard to come by. Most of those who had left England had disembarked at Capetown, and, apart from a lonely colonial governor, his *aide-de-camp*, and a couple of East African settlers and their wives, the ship was given over to a draft of medical officers, more than twenty of them, destined for the German East campaign. They were most of them middle-aged men who had thrown up their practices in the first year of the war, sedate and entirely unsoldierly, carrying with them the atmosphere of their former settled lives; but among them Jim recognized a young man named Page, who had been slightly his senior during his year at St. Luke's. He had belonged to the earnest, spectacled tribe which, in those days, Jim had despised; yet both of them clutched so eagerly at any community of interest that, within a few hours, they felt as if they had been intimate friends.

It seemed curious to Jim to step straight out of the desert on to English soil—for that, in effect, was what the *Balmoral Castle* was.

However alien may be the skies that cover her, whatever palm-fringed shores surround her, or strange craft cling to her sides, a British ship is never more than a floating particle of England. The food that he ate, the familiar inflexions of speech, the general air of methodical orderliness and spit-and-polish, made a strange, thrilling contrast with the life of happy-go-lucky expedients to which he was now accustomed, and filled him with pride for things which he had lately affected to despise. The liner's routine went on as though the war meant nothing to her, as if she still carried her usual crowds of passengers. After dinner the band played the trivial, sentimental tunes that accompany the leisurely digestive processes of life at sea. They played *Un peu d'amour, When Irish Eyes are Smiling, The Little Grey Home in the West*; and those cloying melodies, for ever set against a background of smooth, phosphorescent sea, the steady throbbing of the screws and the whisper of the long bow-wave washing past the steamer's flanks, became, for Jim, the *leit motiv* of their voyage and that ship's company, inducing in himself a mood of mild, romantic wonder as he thought of the strange circumstances which had thrown this group of men, so different in age, in nature, in interests, together, and was sweeping them onward, with engine-beats inexorable as fate, toward a future of unimaginable violence and suffering in the heart of Africa.

His companions, the temporary medical officers, were most of them men with wives and families, as appeared from the homely, shy confidences with which they honoured him. They accepted the war, not, as he did, as an opportunity for romantic adventure, but as a duty to be performed at the behest of conscience. They had "joined up" not because they were conscious of any high, ethical mission, not to right a world-wrong or make the world safe for democracy, but just because England was at war, and they were Englishmen. It was pathetic to see the way in which they strove to discard their years, to infuse an air of gallantry and adventure into their bearing. None of them regretted for a moment the step they had taken in volunteering; yet the gaiety of their talk was shadowed by vague anxieties, not so much for themselves as for the folk they had left behind, and they clutched with a pitiful eagerness at the hopeful news they had picked up in Capetown, the chance that by the time they reached the theatre of war the campaign would be over. Now that Smuts had gone up to the front with the South African Expeditionary Force, all was done, people said, but the shouting; the Germans were bound to surrender. And the war in East Africa, as everyone declared, was only, after all, a side-show, a sort of glorified tropical picnic—a picnic, perhaps, diversified by such inconveniences as malignant malaria and blackwater and sleeping sickness; but then, that was part of the game, the price of chivalry; one couldn't be a hero for nothing! *And gentlemen in England, now abed,* they seemed to be saying to one another.

Most certainly they were heroes, one and all, in Durban; for Natal, more than any province in the Union, prided itself on its inviolable Englishness, and a British uniform made one free not only of the clubs and the tramway system but of every kind of social privilege, the admiration of youth and beauty included. Into the base camp at Congella, a sandy clearing cut out of virgin bush inhabited by innumerable bright birds and small grey monkeys, where Jim and his new friend and old acquaintance Page shared a bell-tent, there penetrated a ceaseless drift of invitations to dances, tennis, picnics, surf-bathing parties, diversions of every kind with which these Cleopatras distracted the prospective hero's attention from the fatal cup.

It was amusing to see the shamefaced way in which the middle-aged volunteers surrendered to their charming and innocent advances. To Jim they were wholly delightful, for many of the Durban girls were not only pretty and dutifully lavish in their attentions, but dowered with an appealing, lighthearted frankness which it would have been hard to find in their Scotch or English cousins. It was at one of their gay parties, at a house on the Berea submerged in cascades of vivid bougainvillea, that Jim suddenly found himself confronted by a familiar face, his hand clasped by Furnival's hand.

From that moment the rest was forgotten. It seemed just as if they were back on the *stoep* at Luipaard's Kloof as they started to explain to each other what had happened since last they met.

"Just after you left Schoengesicht," Furnival told him, "my partner got invalided, thank God! I don't mean that really. The poor devil was horribly crocked with dysentery; but that gave me my chance. I buzzed right off to England and enlisted; had a couple of months at a school at a hell of a place called Grantham, and managed to get my commission. Then a month in France and a nice, harmless blighty-wound. Back to depot . . . Then, one day, the C.O. asked for volunteers for East Africa. I was on it like a bird. The cold in England was bloody after the Cape. I told 'em I'd been in South Africa. All Africa's the same to those blighters. They sent me off at once on a trooper. I came here last week. Now I'm waiting for another transport to go up north."

"So am I," Jim told him.

"How topping! We shall go together. Where are you quartered?"

"At Congella."

"Congella? That's my place. Why haven't I seen you before? I thought the last draft was all fatherly medical gentlemen. I say, Redlake my boy, there are some wonderful girls in Durban. Look here, we must celebrate this. It's too good to be true. Let's dine at the Royal and go to the theatre afterwards. Ethel Irving's acting in *The Ware Case*."

That evening they met and dined. It was a great reunion, full of memories of Luipaard's Kloof and of Schoengesicht. They finished one bottle of Burgundy. Furnival called for another, although he had drunk most of the first. "My dear chap, this is a party!" he said. "Come along, now! Don't spoil it."

Jim laughed and consented. By this time Furnival was mildly oiled. He began to embarrass Jim by staring at all the women and appraising their various charms somewhat too loudly and frankly.

"There's a girl over there," he said, "she's the peach of the lot. And she's dining, damn her, with a blasted civilian. It's wrong, Redlake; it isn't fair. I say that in times like this the army should have first chance."

He said it so loudly and offensively that Jim begged him to moderate his voice.

"Keep quiet?" Furnival persisted. "Why should I? I tell you it's a damned shame! What the devil's the fellow doing in mufti? That's what I want to know! I've a damned good mind to go over and ask him myself. Oh, shut up yourself! All right, all right, I will. You're a cold-blooded blighter, Redlake; you've not even looked at her."

"I should think she's had enough embarrassment already from you," Jim told him.

"Well, that's her fault, looking so damnably attractive," Furnival grumbled. "You're missing a treat if you knew it. The way she puts up her head when she's eating asparagus just knocks me silly. They're not looking this way now. If you just turn your eyes you can see her. I dare you to speak to her, Redlake. Go on . . . quick!"

Half laughing at his friend—at that moment, in spite of his indignation, laughter came easily—Jim glanced over his shoulder. Then Furnival was shocked to see him push back his chair and rise to his feet. Now he was alarmed.

"I say," he whispered anxiously, "you can't do that! I was only joking. Redlake!" he called. "Come here!"

But Jim took no heed of him. He walked straight over to the table where the object of Furnival's indiscreet admiration was sitting. Furnival watched him with blank amazement and anxiety mingled in his face. Jim spoke to her; the girl rose; she glowed; she cried: "But how wonderful!" They were holding both hands; their faces were close together; he saw Jim kiss her twice.

"Oh, my God!" Furnival groaned to himself. "That's done it!" He gulped down the rest of the wine. "Waiter, get me another bottle of this stuff," was all he could say.

For now Jim, entirely deserting him, had pulled up a chair to the other table. They were talking nineteen to the dozen. The girl's eyes shone. Her companion, a middle-aged man wearing horn-rimmed spectacles, felt out in the cold, and showed it. Jim's ordnance-bought uniform simply wiped the floor with him. In her excitement she hadn't even remembered to introduce Jim to him. When she did so at last, he smiled, rather sourly, and made no attempt to edge himself into the conversation. "*His* party's crashed even worse than mine," Furnival thought, with some satisfaction. "If he's any sense he'll take no notice of 'em and go on with his dinner like me." He looked at his watch. They would be lucky, as it was, if they reached the theatre before the curtain went up. When Jim returned to their table at last his face was flushed and his voice excited.

"It's all right," he said. "They're going on to the theatre."

"Oh, *are* they?" said Furnival. "In that case I'd better say good-bye to you and get it over."

"I say, I'm damned sorry, old chap. She's a girl I know."

"I should think so. You jolly near ate her."

Jim laughed gaily. "That's the queer thing about it. I'd never kissed her in my life."

"It was a treat for the fellow she was with. You could see he enjoyed it thoroughly. Who is she?"

"Her name's Catherine Malthus. Her father's a parson in Leicestershire."

"Well, here's to his health! Has he any more of that kind at home?"

"Four . . . no . . . three," Jim told him, as he began to gobble the remains of his dinner.

"Well, you needn't choke yourself anyway. We shall miss the first act as it is."

"I don't want any more," Jim told him. "Come along, we can take a *ricksha*."

"You might give me time to light a cigar, young fellow," Furnival grumbled.

The fresh air heightened the effect of the wine Jim's companion had drunk. Though, after his first, too careless rapture, Furnival appeared to be carrying his liquor more or less like a gentleman, Jim dare not face the risk of introducing him to Catherine or of approaching her himself in the interval for fear of disaster. As they sat in the stalls, the action and speech of the play no more entered his brain than reflections penetrate the surface of placid water. Beneath them, this sudden encounter with Catherine still stirred him deeply. No doubt his mood was susceptible. His recovery from his passion for Cynthia, the three years and more of solitude, the excitement naturally aroused by the proximity during those days of so much provocative prettiness, combined with the high-strung atmosphere of a base in wartime—the realization, implied but unexpressed in all these kind faces, of the fact that within a few days his life would be given over to the chance of brutal extinction—all these had quickened and coloured the emotions of which he believed himself to be in complete control.

As he watched Catherine's profile posed between his eyes and the amber mist of the footlights, he wondered why it had never struck him before that she was beautiful. Of course, in their schooldays at Cold Orton, he had taken her for granted. Later, when her beauty matured, he had been intoxicated with Cynthia, though Catherine could not have been as lovely then as she was now, her physical presence ripened by the South African sun. "I can't think why I kissed her to-night," he told himself; "it seemed just natural. As I said just now, I'd never kissed her before."

That explanation was sufficient for the first kiss; but what of the second? The second, he admitted, had been of a totally different variety. It had come from the fact that, as his lips touched her cheeks, he had heard, unbelievably, the sound of a kiss on Catherine's. She had kissed the air, returning his kiss, as a child will do. It was the spontaneity of her action that warmed him. Perhaps, after all, it meant nothing.

"Well, aren't you going to introduce me to the lady?" Furnival asked as the lights went up.

"I've spoiled that poor fellow's night out already," Jim said, excusing himself.

"You're a damn dog-in-the-manger; that's what you are," Furnival growled; but by this time he was too sleepy to persist.

As they left the theatre Jim managed to slip away from him and get in another word with Catherine. She promised to meet him on the Ocean Beach next morning. For the moment he had his work cut out getting Furnival back to Congella. Finally, having shoved him into a tent which he hoped was the right one, he navigated his way through the dark, over guys and tent-pegs, toward his own, to which, like the note of a fog-horn, the familiar and characteristic snore of the virtuous Page directed him. Jim cursed Page and turned him over. The snoring ceased. There was no sound now, through all the sleeping camp, but the stirring of innumerable life in the sub-tropical bush. Through the inverted V of the bell-tent's opening he gazed into a sector of blue-black sky powdered with great spills of nebulæ among which, like a glittering trinket, the Southern Cross was suspended. Already his army blanket was dripping with dew. In the night a wind rose; the tent-flies flapped drearily; rain came down in cataracts. Next morning the low-lying camp at Congella resembled a sand-flat emerging from the ebb of the tide. A discouraging day, Jim thought, for his meeting with Catherine.

Yet when, on the Ocean Beach, he saw her approaching, the spite of wild weather meant nothing to him. This time, though he wanted to kiss her more than ever, he didn't dare do so. "And that's a bad sign," he thought. She was dressed very simply, in a plain print frock and a big shady hat; her rusticity made a strange contrast with Cynthia's remembered elegance; but with Catherine, somehow, it seemed as if clothes didn't matter, or rather as if the utter simplicity of her dress enhanced her naturalness. She looked better, indeed, by daylight than in evening dress. There was a lovely freedom and health in all her movements. It seemed that her exotic surroundings had coaxed the rather stiff and angular physique which he remembered at Cold Orton to expand into a new physical splendour without altering the essential Catherine whom he knew—the grave, quiet, clear-eyed girl whose subdued golden warmth, like that of an April morning, had invited his friendship ever since they were children together.

How well she walks, he thought, how straight she carries herself; how clean and sweet and honest and good she is! The firm, cool hand that clasped his had no languidness in it. As she smiled at Jim under her broad-brimmed hat and spoke in the pure, unaffected English that the Malthuses used, all the atmosphere of Cold Orton vicarage came back to him with its suggestion of a choice aristocracy —not of manners nor of fashion but of sanity in the conduct of life. "Wherever she goes, from the poles to the equator," he thought, "this girl will carry with her the best of England." Yet she loved South Africa, he found, as much as he did. Wherever they went that day her eyes were quick and curious to catch the beauties which were strange to both of them; her mind was vigorous and alive; it took nothing for granted. Unlike any woman he had known, from Cynthia to Miss Moger, there appeared to be no trace of coquetry in her attitude toward him.

They had so much to say to each other, so many things to explain, that they scarcely knew where to begin.

"Where's Mark, and how is he?" he asked.

A faint cloud shadowed her eyes. Mark, she told him, had sailed for German East Africa four months ago, very proud of himself as a sergeant in the Fifth Infantry Regiment. He had been getting on splendidly, she said, in his sugar plantation; it seemed such a shame that he had been snatched away. Before he sailed, they had decided that she should stay on at the farm and wait for his return. After all, their house was comfortable—she wished Jim could see it—and though the firm was paying his wages during his absence, it was difficult and terribly expensive to return to England. The campaign, people said, might finish any day; and then, she supposed, he would come back.

"Thank heaven you didn't go home to England," Jim told her. "If you had, we shouldn't be here together at this moment."

"Yes, it's lovely to meet again," she said, "in a strange place like this."

He questioned her about her companion of the night before. It pained him to see that she blushed as she answered. His name was Taylor. He was South African born; he came from Pietermaritzburg and was the accountant who dealt with the books of the plantation on which Mark worked. No, he wasn't married.

"Is he a great friend of yours?" Jim asked.

"Yes, of course he is," she said. "He's been awfully kind to both of us."

"Is he . . ." Jim began; but it was too difficult to find any words that wouldn't sound brutal and reveal, too obviously, the jealousy that pricked him; and, as his question hung in the air, Catherine answered: "No, no, Jim, I'm not in love with him," and then surprised him with another: "What has happened to Cynthia Folville?"

"Oh, she's married," Jim told her. "She married my friend Julian Hinton." As he spoke he felt that Catherine's clear eyes were set on him, with a kindness in which faint amusement was mingled with pity. He was inspired to make a clean breast of it.

"You didn't know I was keen on her, Catherine?"

She laughed. "Of course I did, Jim."

"How the deuce . . .?" But she only smiled and shook her head. "That's all over, you know," he told her.

"Didn't you say she was married?"

"It was over long before that," he anxiously explained. "I suppose you thought it was a joke?"

"I was awfully sorry for you."

"She *was* lovely, wasn't she?" He spoke quite dispassionately.

"Yes. Nobody could deny her that."

"Don't let's talk any more of her. But don't, for heaven's sake, imagine I say that because it hurts me to do so. It doesn't in the least. She means nothing to me now."

He wanted to make that quite clear. And indeed, when they had thus disposed of her friend Mr. Taylor and Cynthia, their companionship seemed to rest on a firmer and franker basis. It surprised Jim to find how much he and Catherine had in common: not merely in the childish memories over which they laughed together—the wild pranks of their schooldays, the dear woods and fields, the comic and lovable human figures that moved across the Thorpe Folville scene—but in the interests and enthusiasms of their present life. During the years through which Jim had immersed himself in the sheerly physical existence of Schoengesicht Catherine Malthus had developed. She had not abandoned her music; in the evening, after work, she and Mark had read aloud to each other. As far as the literature of the moment was concerned she had not only caught Jim up but outdistanced him; she had read all the later Redlakes—Jim's father's work, it appeared, had not been improved by Mrs. Parrot's inspiration—and Starling's attempt to shock the bourgeois had failed to shock her.

But beyond and above these things was an interest more vital than any based upon their common love of the arts; she had fallen, as completely as Jim, beneath the spell of Africa; its vastness filled her imagination, its mysterious future enthralled her. As they sat side by side on the top of the ridge to which they had wandered, Jim told her of his journey through the low *veld* and over the *berg* to Sterkstroom on the eve of the war; of that moment of crystallization in which, looking back at McLeod's lonely figure, the dun waste had suddenly lost its blankness and terror and claimed him, once and for all, as its predestined lover.

"Do you know, Jim," she said, "I can remember a moment in which it appeared to me just like that? It's almost frightening, isn't it?"

"No, not frightening. It makes you feel stronger. It gives life a purpose. It must be rather like what a man feels when he sees the woman he knows that he's going to marry and live with till he dies. I suppose a girl feels just the same."

She smiled. "I don't know, Jim."

"Would you be content to live here always, Catherine?"

"Not in Durban; not in a town. I'm sure I could live in a place like the one that you've just been describing. Provided . . ." She stopped.

"Provided what?"

"Well, I couldn't live there alone, or with anybody who didn't understand what I felt or feel just the same as I did." She changed the subject abruptly, as though she were nervous of the direction in which it carried them. "We shall have to be going," she said, "or I shall miss my train home."

"Can I see you again to-morrow?" he pleaded.

"Of course. You can see as much of me as you want to, Jim . . . *if* you want to."

The rest of that week at Durban was a strange experience. His companions in the camp at Congella saw little of Jim, for Page was invariably snoring when he reached their tent at night, and Furnival, in envy and desperation, had attached himself to an unknown and almost unknowable lady whom he had picked up in West Street. "She's all right—a thorough good sort!" he confided. From which Jim gathered that she was all wrong—and a thorough bad lot.

From morning till night he and Catherine were always together: on her brother's plantation, where she glowed with pride to show him the bungalow they had furnished; on the beach, where they swam in the surf and lounged sleepily afterwards; on long walks, when, braving the autumnal sun, they climbed into the cool dry air of Pinetown and talked for hours with Durban sweltering beneath them in its hot sea-haze; in gay, intimate meals that they ate together on the *stoep* of the Royal grill-room. The atmosphere of those days was exalted and rarefied not only by the joy, the miraculous security which Jim had found in his rediscovery of Catherine, but by the sense of impending separation and things darker still that overshadowed them. Though he was not always conscious of this, there were moments of silence between them in which both were aware of it, when he saw the gaiety of himself and the girl beside him as that of brittle ephemerids spinning in still slanting sunlight beneath a thundery sky whose blackness might break at any moment into a deluge that would beat them down out of their airy dance with broken wings.

Save when they spoke of Mark in East Africa they never mentioned the war. Whatever they thought, they spoke only of the present and of the happy future when it should all be over; the space between they left, as by tacit agreement, to its own impenetrable darkness. Nor yet, though Jim knew that he loved her and believed that Catherine loved him, did they speak of love. It was enough, for the moment, that they should be in each other's company, though now, when they met or parted, they kissed one another, and those kisses were very different from the first into which Jim had been surprised. His stay in Durban was lengthening out miraculously. All the transports, it seemed, were busy carrying troops to Europe. The war was further from them now than on the day he had reached Congella.

Then, suddenly, with the spring of a lion, it was upon them. One night, as he returned to Congella, his heart on fire with the memory of Catherine's soft lips, he found the whole camp in a ferment. The *Armadale Castle*, now converted into a cruiser, was coming alongside at dawn and would sail for Mombasa an hour later, or as soon as the troops were embarked. Jim hurried back to the town to see if he could telephone to Catherine. It was impossible, they told him; the local exchange was closed. His only hope of seeing her now lay in the chance that the liner would be late and that she might learn of the sailing as soon as she reached Durban next morning. The camp was alive with waggons and long mule-teams collecting kit for the quay; around their lights the winged things of the bush fluttered in thousands. Even if Jim had wanted to sleep he could not have done so, for though Page was awake, and therefore did not snore, the others kept up a continual sound of talk and packing till the first birds sang. Then they all set out for the quay in the grey light.

The cruiser *Armadale* was now very different from the mail-boat Jim had known on his voyage out, five years before, Hull, deck-houses, funnels; all were now battleship grey. First of all they had gutted her, tearing away not particularly all things that were inflammable, but all that had ever been comfortable. The hard-wood furniture of her saloon had been replaced by deal tables and seats, that would certainly burn like chaff if a shell exploded near them, the berths in the cabins by unplaned boarding. Bathrooms and lavatories had vanished, not because they occupied space, but because cleanliness and sanitation in the tropics were evidently regarded by the navy as unnecessary luxuries. Jim found himself crammed into a cabin eight feet square with five other officers. An order for the day reminded him, if that were necessary, that the ship was not a transport but a man-of-war. Mere soldiers were reminded that they must salute the quarter-deck. A sub-lieutenant, posted at the head of the gangway, explained that, once on board, they were expected to remain there. So much for tender farewells!

Jim paced the main deck with Page and Furnival, who, naturally, had a headache. The sun burst out shining. A multicoloured crowd of whites and Africans and Indians began to silt up behind the guarded barriers that kept the quay empty. He scanned the massed, pale faces hopelessly in search of Catherine's. By this time, he knew she must have reached the station where she expected him to meet her. Would she be quick enough to guess the reason why he wasn't there? Yet what difference would it make in any case? They could not speak.

"I like Durban," Furnival was saying, "I shall come back here when the war is over."

"I certainly shan't," Page said gloomily, "I can promise you that. Give me Wimbledon!"

Rash hope and rash promise, Jim thought. How lightly, with what confidence they made their plans! She had reached the station a quarter of an hour ago. Surely, surely she must come soon?

A shiver ran through the waiting crowd at the barrier; the pale faces turned all one way. In the distance the moving snake of a khaki column appeared: a reserve battalion of Beves's Brigade marching down to embark. As they neared, the rhythmical impact of their feet on the dust-felted road came to Jim a little later than the movements that occasioned the sound. They marched quickly in column of route, with an easy swing; their sun-helmets concealed their faces, but their shorts and bare knees gave them all alike, young or grizzled, a peculiar air of youth, even of boyishness, an indescribable gallantry.

Would she never come?

The soft swishing sound was now synchronized with the marching footfalls. The column filled the length of the quay; they seemed to be marching right into the sea like a mechanical toy when a sudden command made them halt. Another: *Right . . . turn!* They turned; formed two deep. *Stand at . . . ease! Stand . . . easy!*

Beneath him, on the quay, eight hundred heads, framed in their haloes of helmets, looked upward with a mild wonder at the monster that was to carry them northward; and Jim saw that the air of boyish gallantry, like that of a company of boy-scouts, which their shorts and bare knees had given them at a distance, had been a figment of his imagination. The upturned faces, for the most part, were those of hard-bitten men of middle age recruited from the mines of the Rand. As a whole they were not prepossessing; yet the sun and thin air of the high-veld had tanned their knees and faces to a colour as uniform as that of their tropical khaki, the colour of a walnut-juice stain, out of which their gazing eyes shone with a curious paleness. At another word of command, with trailed arms, the long files unwound themselves. Singly they crept up the gangway on to the well-deck for'ard, with a thunderous regular rumble of hard leather on wood, till the last was aboard. A whistle shrilled on the bridge, and the military police on shore threw open the barriers, admitting the patient crowd which spilled over the quay like the content of a burst dam.

"There's my girl!" Furnival grasped Jim's arm and tugged at it excitedly. "The one in the red hat, I knew she'd come. Do you see?"

Jim didn't even look. At that moment his eyes had found Catherine. Very slender and pale she looked in her white linen frock, rather lost amid the hubbub of the crowd, which moved and buzzed incessantly like a skep of swarming bees. Jim called to her, vainly: his voice was lost in the sound of so many others. Then, at last, she spotted him. She smiled and shook her head helplessly to indicate that it was impossible for either of them to be heard. Already, with naval precision, the gang-planks had been drawn up; the great ship was separated from the quay by a yard of oily water. Catherine threaded her way through the crowd like a slim white ghost and stood immediately beneath the cliff-like side of the ship, her face upturned. A faint smile parted her lips, but her face, at that distance, looked small and pale and pathetic. It seemed strange to Jim that all his happiness should be wrapped up in those features, so little, so fragile, so lost in the swarming crowd.

By this time, insensibly, the hull had drifted a couple of fathoms from shore; the engines began to rumble; churned water whitened astern. The emotion of the crowd, gathering strength from all its units, was so potent now that it could be felt as a collective force.

This departure differed entirely from those grim scenes at the London termini of which Jim had read. It was spectacular, heroic. The sun shone splendidly on the sailing of this great grey ship which seemed to symbolize, with her bows pointed seaward, a spirit of romantic and perilous adventure. The gazing crowd grew awed and quiet, until one woman's voice, which seemed to become the chosen, inevitable vehicle of its gathered emotion, burst out suddenly into the chorus of a popular song.

"*Keep the home fires burning,*" it sang, and with one accord, as though all its members were thankful to find a release for their feelings, the dense mass of human beings took up the tune till it rolled with a force that seemed more than human down the length of the quay; the great volume of sound echoed back from the sheds and hangars, reaching out, like an embodiment of courage and goodwill and hope to the retreating ship, and the trivial words, such was the spirit behind them, became invested, for the moment, with the significance of great poetry.

There's a silver lining
Through the dark cloud shining:
Turn the dark cloud inside out
Till the boys . . . come . . . home!

Catherine was not singing with the rest of them. Jim saw her turn suddenly and slip away through the singing crowd. The troops on the foredeck were waving their helmets, answering the cry of "Are we downhearted?" with a thunderous "No!" Jim moved away for'ard and stood looking out to sea. That moment was the real beginning of the war for him.

III. *Invasion*

THE *Armadale Castle* steamed steadily northward, with a fifteen knot breeze astern, into the furnace of the Mozambique channel. The air on deck was like that of a Turkish bath; below, a nauseous smell of men sweating side by side, packed close as steers in a cattle-boat, invaded every corner of her ill-ventilated hull. At night all lights were extinguished; all port-holes and bulkheads closed, for fear of attack by submarine. The air of the tween-decks brought to Jim's mind a memory of the homeward voyage of *le petit Sylvestre* from Cochin China in Loti's *Pêcheur d'Islande*. After breathing it for more than an hour at a time he emerged on deck panting, with a filthy mouth. In his own cramped cabin sleep was impossible; for the shipwrights who had stripped it of its last semblance of comfort had neglected to deal with the bed-bugs which, when night fell, advanced on him hungrily in mass-formation; while by day, the deck overhead echoed continually with the tramp of the South African recruits perfecting their drill.

The officers on board had been segregated, navy-fashion, into watertight compartments: a ward-room for those above the rank of Captain, and a gun-room for those below it, who included Jim, his *Balmoral* friends, and a host of South African subalterns. The latter, for the most part back-veld Boers, with shabby, ill-fitting uniforms and unshaven chins, looked as if they had stepped straight out of the roughest work of the farms into their new vocation. At meal-times, Jim, Furnival, Page, and a British ranker-officer named Martin, sat opposite four of them. Of the Boers only one could speak English; Page and the ranker nothing but Cockney, while Furnival's Afrikaans was rudimentary. It ended in Jim and the English-speaking Dutchman, whose name was Malan, acting as interpreters for the rest.

In spite of this handicap they made a jolly party. The Boers, though junior in rank, were all middle-aged men and old soldiers who had fought not only in the rebellion and in German South-West but also against the English in the second Boer War. A queer kind of comradeship was established when Malan discovered that he and the ranker, Martin, had taken part, on opposite sides, in the battles of Spion Kop and Colenso. It was strange to hear them excitedly discussing these engagements, recalling the lie of the land and incidents of the fighting.

"I was hit in the left leg," Martin said, "by a sniper hidden in a little *kopje* with a clump of aloes on the top of it on your extreme left. We tried to dislodge the devil with shrapnel, but we never got him."

"No, you never got him," Malan laughed uproariously; "because here he is, sitting opposite to you!" And he slapped his nearest companion on the shoulder. "This is the man!" He explained the joke to his friend, a great, lumbering, beetle-browed fellow, with a trailing red walrus-moustache, who nodded emphatically, and grinned across the table at Martin.

"Well, I'm jiggered," said the ranker. "We ought to shake hands on this."

And they did so, solemnly: a gesture that seemed to Jim magnificent. What power in the world, he thought, could withstand a comradeship in arms based on foundations already cemented in bloodshed?

Malan himself had worked in the mines on the Rand and learned to penetrate the Englishman's sense of humour. He saw the funny side of his own people's part in the war. "When the men from the back-veld joined up at first," he told them, "they objected to being caught up in the wheels of the military machine. 'Lieutenant and Captain,' they said. 'What the devil does that mean?' 'Very well,' says Botha. 'You shall keep to your own *commandos*. You can call yourselves Commandants or veld-kornets or anything you damned well like. You can even have gold chevrons of your own instead of the English badges of rank.' Then our folk grew suspicious. 'What's all this nonsense?' they said. 'What's the meaning of these distinctions? Aren't we just as good as the damned *rooineks*?' So old Botha, he said: 'All right, *kerels*, have your own way.' And here we are, with pips and crowns and Sam-Browne belts and the whole doll's croquet-set. Why, I know one old chap who sports two British Boer War medals. 'I've as much right to wear them as anyone else,' he says. 'I fought at Ladysmith and Magersfontein and Paardeberg, didn't I?' 'We're a queer lot,' he boasted, 'but when it comes to irregular fighting we're devils to beat, as the Germans'll find out some day!' "

On the third evening north they reached the Equator, and Jim lugged his blankets on deck. The stars throbbed passionately in a moonless sky. Right ahead of him swung a magnificent strange constellation shaped like a sprawling dragon. It dawned on him suddenly that this group of stars was nothing but the Great Bear, lying upside down, its top pointer lost below the northern horizon. As he lay awake, watching the lightning that washed the clouds which hung over the land, he couldn't help wondering how many of that little company who had sailed from Capetown would ever see the Great Bear right way up again or the frosty twinkle of the pole-star in an English sky.

This moment was the first, since that morning when he had turned and gazed at Schoengesicht, in which the idea of death had ever presented itself to him. He didn't fear death in itself; he was too young, too full of life to feel its reality: yet the idea of physical extinction was now mingled with another—the thought of Catherine Malthus as he had seen her on the quay at Durban, turning quietly away, too deeply moved to look at him. Most things in his life he could steel himself to surrender. But not Catherine. The happiness of that hallucinated week had been only that of promise. It seemed incredible that anything on earth could rob them of their fulfilment; yet the force that carried him on to his veiled fate was as unrelenting as the steady beat of the *Armadale's* engines, urging her vast hull forward under the black night.

He picked his way among the sleeping figures that strewed the deck like corpses, and descended to the empty cabin, where he took pencil and paper and scribbled a long letter to her. He put so much of his heart into it that, when it was finished, his spirits felt lighter. Returning to the deck—but not to sleep—he found for himself the satisfaction which, at that moment perhaps, tens of thousands of other soldiers were finding in the fact that, as far as he realized what duty was, he was doing his duty—a plain thing, far removed from the cant of patriotism. And, even more than in this, he found comfort in the thought that he was not alone in his dread or determination to defy it; he was one with those elderly medical practitioners in their unsoldierly khaki, and Page, and Furnival, and the grim back-veld Boers with their grizzled, unshaven jowls. "For better or worse," he thought, "we're all in it together."

When he woke—for, eventually, he had slept—land was in sight. As the ship came in nearer, the shore rose to greet them; incredibly green it was, with the feathery tops of coconut palms leaning gracefully over black mangrove swamps and vivid brushwood. He saw cliffs of crumbling red earth, sands dazzlingly white with the whiteness of sea-powdered coral. A more peaceful scene no human eye could imagine.

Reporting on shore, Jim and Furnival found themselves posted as machine-gun specialists to an Imperial Service corps, the Second Kalahari Rifles, now resting up in the hills beyond Nairobi.

The base-commandant, an Indian army regular, was full of sanguine enthusiasm, as he stood talking to them on the veranda of his office.

"You fellows don't know your luck, you've got the pick of the regiments out here," he told them. "The Kalaharis are a topping crowd. You're fortunate to be with them; they're more like Englishmen than South Africans; public-school men, most of 'em." This was the first hint that Jim received of the antagonism that existed between the professional soldiers of the Indian Army and the extremely irregular South Africans. "When there's any dirty work going," their friend went on, "you're bound to strike it. Smuts uses the Kalaharis as a spearhead. You'll be in the thick of it as soon as the advance begins. And this, you know, is essentially a machine-gunner's war. Good morning, Mrs. Kilgour!" He saluted a lady, who passed in a *ricksha*, with a beaming smile. "Charming spot, in spite of the heat, Mombasa," he told them. "Most hospitable people. They quite understand our ways. In Nairobi they're inclined to be difficult, I may as well warn you."

This second hint, at the moment mysterious, referred, as Jim gathered later, to another antagonism. The settlers of Nairobi, and particularly those who had left their wives behind them, resented the cavalier air with which the Indian Expeditionary Force, which certainly, after the blunders of Tanga and Jasin, had nothing to shout about, had taken possession of their capital, their clubs and their womenfolk. And indeed, as he and Furnival stepped on to the platform of the terminus at Mombasa, Jim couldn't help being struck by the enormous diversity of the elements of which the force to which he now belonged was composed.

He saw thin-lipped aristocratic Arabs; Swahili of the coast, who resembled them; Askaris of the King's African Rifles, from Nubia and the Soudon; Kikuyu porters and servants, and coal-black Kavirondos; even, here and there, a Zulu who looked like his cousin's "boy" Elias, and the familiar, yellowish Hottentot faces of the Cape Corps—all the peoples of Africa from the Nile to the Cape, from the Congo to Zanzibar. The Indians were no less diverse: fierce-bearded Sikhs; pale, handsome Pathans; stocky Ghurkas and gentle Dogras of the Kashmir Rifles; Punjabi Mussulmans, the backbone of the Indian Army; Hindu sweepers and Parsee babus of the Medical Corps; Mahrattas and black-faced Dravidians of the "Hundred and Worst," as the regiment that had failed at Tanga was scornfully called; slow-smiling Goanese cooks and Madrasi Christians.

The white units of the force, though less widely separated in appearance, were no less sharply divided by distinction of caste. The East African settlers moved with a languid, contemptuous air, as though the country belonged to them (as indeed it did) and all others were intruders; the officers of the Indian army asserted the same claim as by right of conquest, despising the black African as the settlers despised the black Aryan. The British regulars of the Loyal North Lancs looked just what they were: old soldiers, to whom one country or one war was as good or as bad as another, provided they got their daily ration of beef. The South Africans, on the other hand, still showed themselves out for adventure: bright amateurs, ready to clear up the mess the professionals had made, or farmers, prospecting new land at the Union's expense.

No such heterogeneous mass of men had ever, in the history of mankind, embarked on a warlike adventure. As Jim gazed at them curiously he couldn't help being aware of their racial and social antagonisms and wondering what power could fuse their divergent aims into one. Patriotic enthusiasm—devotion to a flag, to a crown? Three-fourths of them had no idea what patriotism meant. Hatred of the enemy? To an equal number the word "German"—or "*Germani*," as the army of invasion Africanized it—signified nothing whatever. The lure of adventure? The hope of material gain? A little, perhaps; though the adventurous part of the men at the front was small compared with the dreary lot of those scattered over the desolate hundreds of miles of communications, and looting was punished by death. No, the thing that bound these men of different creeds and colours and races together was, in fact, the prestige of one name—that of their leader, Jan Smuts. Suspected by his own countrymen, who called him "slim Jannie," envied by the professional soldiers with reputations to make, who regarded him as a mere politician, an amateur interloper, this man's personality, remote, unsympathetic, cold, well-nigh inhuman as it seemed, had impressed itself on the whole force as an incarnation of the will to conquer. There was no other name to conjure with in German East.

So much Jim learned, on the journey up-country, from a talkative officer attached to the Twenty-ninth Punjabis who had been sent down with a draft to the coast. As the train slowly pushed its way inland through a desert of thorn and speared sisal and elephant-hided baobabs, this youth, who had already seen service in France, entertained him and Page and Furnival with his private views on the campaign.

"Give me France every time," he said. "This show is a dog's life. You'll know what it means when you've lived on half-rations or less for three months and given your soul for a cupful of water as thick as coffee grounds and marched twenty miles in a day through bush like a quickset hedge with a 'go' of malaria on you! Why, compared with this show, a front-line trench in the Wipers sector's a bed of roses. As for fighting—of course you know this is mainly a machine-gun game; but the devil of it is, in this dirty bush-work, you never know where the enemy is till he's half wiped you out with an enfilading fire, or opened on you from the rear. It's fighting in the dark; and the Germani, to give him his due, is a dab at machine-guns."

"That's our job," Jim told him.

"Well, I wish you joy of it," the Punjabi said bitterly. "I hope you'll see something to aim at. *I* never have. Of course, now that Smuts is commanding, we may get a move on. He's a thruster, that fellow!" And he went on to explain how, when Smith-Dorrien came out, his staff went on ahead to establish headquarters at Nairobi, a comfortable spot, three hundred miles from the front. "When

Smith-Dorrien fell ill at the Cape," he continued, "and Smuts took over, he soon changed all that. One day at Nairobi fed *him* up. In twenty-four hours poor old G.H.Q. was about two inches behind the front line—and sometimes in front of that; the man has no nerves, you know; he gives his whole staff the slip sometimes and goes out on his own just to say how d'ye do to the Germans and see what they're doing. Oh, Smuts is a devil, you can take it from me!"

"But now that you've got the South Africans," Furnival began. . . .

"*You're* not a South African, are you?" the Punjabi asked tactfully. "Kalaharis? They're very different. I'll tell you about them in that case. You know Salaita—the hill that old Tighe attacked and made such a muck of? Well, that *Shauri* was the South Africans' first show, their first taste of fire. They went in cock-a-whoop, and came out of it double-quick. Left their blessed machine-guns behind! The Hundred and Thirtieth Baluchis picked them up for them and sent 'em back with their compliments, poor devils! next morning. Of course, I don't blame 'em. It's quite natural. I know plenty of things like that that have happened to new battalions in France. You can't judge 'em by that; they'll do better next time no doubt; but it taught them a lesson: they won't call our sepoys 'coolies' in a hurry again! And mind you," he went on, "that's one of the damned dangerous things about this campaign—for the future of Africa, I mean. Up till now the white man in Africa's been a sort of God. Now black men, on both sides, have seen the pretty spectacle of white men running away from them. Our askaris, as well as the Germanis', are devils to fight; they don't know what danger is, and they don't feel pain like we do. It's been a hell of a mistake, in my opinion, bringing them into it. There'll be the devil and all to pay for it sooner or later. But, of course, this war's quite different from other wars."

"What about fever?" Page asked, with professional interest.

"Well, you're bound to get it, if that's what you mean. That's all."

"Prophylactic quinine and mosquito-nets," Page began, laying down the law.

"Prophylactic rot!" the Punjabi broke in. "There isn't enough quinine in the country. And as for mosquito-nets. . . . You try 'em, my son, when you're out on patrol at night with the bush full of Germans. How'ld you like to be surprised with ten feet of butter muslin wound around your neck?" he asked scornfully. "It's just the same with these handsome shorts we're all wearing." He slapped his black knees. "Nice and airy for marching by day, of course; but I can tell you they're hell when mosquitoes get going at night. However, we've got to wear them. They're the Indian Medical Service's idea of tropical kit, blast their eyes! Well, you know what they did in Mespot as well as I do. That's a rotten *babu*-ridden corps if ever there was one!"

This encouraging companion left them at Voi, with Page in tow, to rejoin his unit on the Taveta front. As the train rolled onward and always upward, the air grew sensibly cooler; the expanses of red-faced desert, whose blown sand silted into every corner and cranny of their clothes their kit and their persons, gave place, at last, to wide lawns of waving grasses whose coppery heads, shimmering under the vertical sun, recalled a field of ripe hay in an English summer. Gradually the sun clouded over, as it will in an African afternoon; the wide horizons were rimmed with silvery, flat-based cumulus. All the trees of the bush were ashen or grey like olives. And then, in the midst of the clouds that brooded over the South West, appeared something more white than any sun-lit cloud and even more insubstantial. Jim knew it at once for the snowy cone of Kilimanjaro, lifted twenty thousand feet above the burning sea-board, and as his gaze rested on the blue smoke of its glaciers, whose phantasmal ice, before long, his eyes would seek so often, he felt, once again, the baptismal emotion he had known in Sterkstroom.

That mountain, the high tutelary spirit of Smuts' invasion, found a peer and companion in Jim's eyes next day, when they reached the camp where the war-shattered Kalaharis were "resting," in the equal splendours of Mount Kenya, dominating the north. Not for long. On the very evening of their arrival the regiment received its orders to return to the front. The rains, which for more than twelve weeks had converted the plains beneath Kilimanjaro into a steaming morass, had ceased at last. With five months of dry weather in front of him, Smuts was on the move.

In the Kalaharis' camp this news produced a sensation of sudden relief. Their high isolation at Kabete, as the occupant of the next tent, a dry, one-armed Scotsman named Macdiarmid told Jim, had been better for their bodies than their souls. The place had been too far from Nairobi, the nearest town, to afford any chance of amusement, while the enforced idleness had given them time to think about themselves. "Which," Macdiarmid affirmed, "is a great mistake in wartime." These new orders provided them with plenty of other things to think about: the striking of the camp; the assembly of field-kit; the reorganization of transport. An air of brisk vigorous confidence permeated the whole camp.

Indeed, as Jim and Furnival sat talking to their new companions that evening they found their attitude healthier and more generous than any which they had met before among the East African troops. The Kalaharis, as the base-commandant at Mombasa had suggested, were a *corps d'élite*, and aware of the obligations of that distinction, which placed them above the professional jealousies shown by Indians for South Africans, by South Africans for Indians, and by East African settlers for both. Secure in their own reputation, they were ready to applaud the achievements of others. Even if the new regiments of infantry had failed at Salaita, the South Africans, they said, could still congratulate themselves on the superb feat of Van Deventer's forced march to Kondoa Irangi—two hundred and fifty miles in a couple of weeks of drenching rain—bootless, wasted by fever, living, as best they might, on hippo-meat, the flesh of their own stricken transport-animals, and the scanty remains of the mealie crop which the Germans destroyed as they retreated. Nor did they, like the South Africans, speak of the Indian troops as "coolies"; they had seen the advance of the Baluchis on the Latema ridge, and gave them their due. Of their own exploits they had nothing to say. They had done what was asked of them, cleanly, efficiently; and that was enough.

In later years, when a spate of war-literature, as men called it, drenched the world, when the neurotic conscripts of all nations vied with each other in venting their tortured brains of the filth and fear and brutality which were all they remembered of war, Jim's thoughts would often return to the Kalaharis, recalling the spirit which, while it suffered these things, contrived, without any romantic self-hypnotism or sentimentality, to accept them for what they were worth and put them in their proper place. If these men were heroes—and they had proved it daily—they were not conscious of it; yet much less did they deem themselves helpless units massed by force or fate in a conglomeration of cannon-fodder. They were free men, confident, yet not over-proud, in the loyalties that, however pitifully, governed their lives—to humanity, as they saw it, to their racial traditions, to their regiment; and this community of aim and of feeling gave that body of sorely-tried men a sense of brotherhood which Jim soon came to share with pride and with gratitude as something transcending his personal consciousness of war's filth or fear or brutality—the more so because of a certain simplicity and gentleness that marked, like a physical stamp, the regiment's type. He found this easier, perhaps, because the Kalaharis presented an intrinsication of the much contemned public-school spirit in which, fortunately or unfortunately, he himself had been bred. Apart from differences in uniform and messing arrangements there was no distinction between their officers and the men in the ranks. The texture of the regiment was so homogeneous that when an officer was killed or laid low with disease—and by the time that its remnants reached the central railway only two of its original command remained—a sergeant could assume his stars or a private the sergeant's stripes, without any change in the battalion's character or diminution of its discipline. Such graded types as the pink-faced major at Capetown or Sergeant Steel were unknown in it. If this war, as the cant phrase had it, was a fight for democracy, the Kalaharis might be regarded as that principle's chosen defenders.

By the time that they reached the back of the front, at a mission-station called Taveta under the loom of Kilimanjaro, Jim and Furnival, diffident and inexperienced as they were, had begun to feel as if they had always belonged to the regiment. Apart from his neighbour at Kabete, the one-armed elephant-hunter Macdiarmid, who had hitherto commanded the machine-gun company, and was still Jim's immediate superior, he had made the acquaintance (which, in those tense days, amounted to friendship) of half a dozen others: the officer in command, Colonel Essex, a man all-steel, with clear-cut, sensitive features that belied his dry manner; the second in command, Major Carlow, a rugged, gentle, soldier of fortune, whose torn tunic was decorated with a double line of faded medal-ribbons;

Captain Bremner, a Wykehamist like himself and Furnival, debonair and invariably elegantly clothed; two brothers Engelbrecht, of South African Dutch extraction, one of whom, in the last engagement, surrounded by the enemy, had clung for twenty-four hours without water or food to the fiercely-disputed Latema ridge; Captain Langford, the quartermaster, a blue-eyed long-faced Englishman, whose slow tongue kept the burr of his home in Somerset; and finally, another newcomer like himself, the medical officer, Martock, whose principal care was a battered portable typewriter from which nothing but death should part him.

"Redlake? Really? I say! Are you any relation . . . ?" he had asked, when he heard Jim's name at Taveta. And straightway they had begun to talk about books, a queer subject in so wild a place. Even inside the iron oven of a sun-blistered cattle-truck at Voi, Jim had seen him typing away. As they sat in the open, on the eve of the advance at Taveta, he confided to Jim that he was writing a book.

"About all this business?" Jim asked.

"Lord, no. It's a novel about the Midlands: the Black Country and the Welsh Marches."

"I know that country a little," Jim told him. "I lived as a boy at Sedgebury, near Mawne, and my people come from Clun Forest."

"Clun Forest? Don't speak of it for God's sake, Redlake!" said Martock. And yet they did speak of it, establishing, as they spoke, the spiritual bond, far closer and subtler than that of common human acquaintance, which unites men who talk, in a distant land, of landscapes which each knows and loves.

If they had scoured the world in search of it, they could not have found a greater contrast to those scenes than their present setting. Even as they sat there talking its face changed. An aura of momentous approaching events was in the air. Creeping along the red earth road which the Indian pioneers had made, dragged by straining mule-teams through chasms that the recent rains had torn in its surface, the great grey M.T. lorries and the Divisional Train poured steadily into Taveta through clouds of churned dust that drifted like firelit smoke above the encampment. Below the road some thousands of horses and mules were being watered—poor beasts that in a few week's time must perish inevitably amid the belts of *tsetse* fly through which they would pass. And, behind the doomed animals, marched company after company of doomed men, the units of the South African Brigade which had sweltered aboard the *Armadale*, tramping in through the dust from railhead, with little enough of their old boyish jauntiness. The sun sank precipitately behind the Latema crest, drenching the forest in a redness that seemed to symbolize the blood of the Kalaharis by which it had been won. And above all this dusty turmoil, remote, magnificently bathed in the last sunlight, swam the glaciers of Kilimanjaro, whose stainless majesty reduced all the stir at its feet—tents scattered like the trail of a paperchase, brown horse-lines, parked transport, slow columns of men crawling onward like centipedes—to a level peculiarly humble and insignificant.

"What a small, feeble thing this army of ours is! From up there we must look like an ant's nest," Martock was saying. "An ignoble sight!"

But, though Jim agreed with him, he couldn't feel, whatever it looked like, that the spirit of this growing camp was ignoble. It was pervaded by a highly-strung sense of confidence and determination, a devotion almost religious, that seemed to be streaming up through the still air to heaven in the incense of innumerable camp-fires. Old friendships, annealed by fire, were renewed, as visitors from other units in the brigade made their way to the Kalaharis' lines. Men shook hands and slapped backs and laughed over their sundowners, bringing the family gossip of the scattered brigade up to date. Late in the evening the Brigadier, Sheppard, stalked rapidly into Headquarters, a sanguine, indefatigable man, his face glowing with health and energy. He appeared to regard this advance, which was later to be remembered as one of the highest achievements of human endurance in the history of war, as a superior kind of field-day for the testing of certain new developments in the technique of bush-fighting.

"You fellows will have to learn a thing or two from the Germans," he said. "We're going where artillery can't go, at any rate at our pace. The machine-gun must play a bigger part than ever before. Mobility . . . *Mobility!* That's what we've got to get. Intelligence says that the enemy carry their machine-guns about on some sort of hammock, with a number of porters to teach. That's why, when you think you've spotted them, they open fire on you from another angle before you've had time to search the position you've found. The Cape Corps have light Lewis guns; I wish we could get some more of 'em; but we can't. Of course your maxims are devilish heavy, and mule-transport's clumsy. Besides which, by the time that you've gone a hundred miles, you'll probably find yourselves without any mules at all. The low-country in front is full of horse-sickness and fly. We shall move pretty quickly while we can. As usual, our brigade will go first."

He began to explain the general plan of the new operations with his gay, brisk, professional enthusiasm, the vivacious relish of a staff-college man about to put theory to the test, pointing with his cane to a series of large-scale maps that Essex had unfolded on the ground.

"The G.O.C. doesn't give away much, not even to his staff," he said, rather ruefully; "but this, I take it, is what we're proposing to do: Von Lettow is keeping an eye on Van Deventer there"—he pointed—"at Kondoa Irangi, afraid of his making another swoop, like the last one, on the Central Railway. As a matter of fact we know, unfortunately, that Van Deventer can't move; he's up to his knees in mud and has lost his boots, anyway." He laughed gaily. "Very well. Now Kraut, with the rest of the German force, is facing us at Lembeni just South of Kahe on the Tanga Railway, with reserves in the Pare Mountains which command it. He's had a good rest, like all of us, since Latema. He's well armed with new guns, and has plenty of ammunition—thanks to our naval friends, who've kindly let in another blockade-runner. Well, *we* want that railway, for a number of obvious reasons, such as economy of horseflesh and shoe-leather—to say nothing of human lives. No frontal attacks like Salaita this time, Colonel! Our force will split into two columns. Hannyngton, with the K.A.R., will move downward on this northern side of the Pare range on the Germanis' right flank, that is; and our division will do exactly the same on his left between the Tanga Railway and the River Pangani. While Hannyngton watches Kraut, our march is going to threaten his communications. He may stand and fight, in which case we shall have to dislodge him; a stiff job, for the railway will give his heavy guns an advantage. In any case he's bound to dispute our advance with rearguard actions. But if Kraut *does* decide to retire—and the G.O.C. thinks he will—he'll be able to do it much more quickly, thanks again to the railway, than we can advance. He'll probably decide to cross the river between Mombo and Korogwe, where there's a light railway or trolley-line of sorts that'll enable him to link up with Von Lettow. And that's where *we* come in," said Sheppard, his dark face glowing. "We've got to go faster than that railway on our own flat feet. From the air, I'm told, the country looks pretty easy. Unhealthy, of course, and marshy in places; it's much too near to the river. So, even if Kraut *won't* fight, the wastage in horses and men will be terrific. But if we beat the railway and cut Kraut off, as we're going to, we shorten our L. of C. by five hundred miles and get a new base at Tanga; and then Von Lettow, if he's any sense, will throw up the sponge, and this part of the war will be over. For the moment our orders are simply to concentrate near Kahe. No one knows, of course, on what day the movement will begin, but, when it does begin, we shall move at some pace, I assure you. Well, good-bye and good luck. I'm going on to see the Baluchis."

He went, stepping out with long strides that left his staff-officer panting. At Quetta, Jim heard, General Sheppard would walk forty miles in a day and play hard racquets on the top of it without tiring. The impact of this vivid, sanguine personality was heartening to all of them, his keenness infectious. With a commander of that stamp, Jim thought, the life of the brigade should never, at least, be dull.

As night fell on Taveta, a night of mild tropical moonlight, his last for many months under canvas, Jim lay on his camp-bed listening. The darkness had smothered all signs of that huge concentration of men and animals as completely as though it had been a phantasmal phenomenon discernible only by the sense of sight. The clouds of dust gradually settled, leaving the air cool and sweet. To Jim's ears it was full of intimate, unwarlike sounds: the clatter of tin pannikins; the clicking of Martock's typewriter in a neighbouring tent; then, somewhere down in "A" Company's lines, the wail of a violin, to which its owner was bidding a plaintive good-bye. He played the slow movement of the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto and Dvorak's Humoresque; and those tunes, which Jim had always regarded as sugary and commonplace, acquired, in the light of imminent events, a poignant wistfulness that caught at his heart. In himself there dwelt an emotion far stronger than the music that reinforced it. At last the clicking of Martock's typewriter ceased;

the violinist stopped playing. The only sound audible now was a blur of low voices lazily talking on the verge of sleep. Then that, too, died away. The silence was stripped to the last thin layer which concealed it: the soft breathing of hundreds of trek-oxen, lying beside their waggons, enveloping the camp in a sound that was like a deep continuous sigh.

Next morning the regiment, stripped to the last bare necessaries of equipment, marched out in a dusty dawn over the flank of the mountain, over foothills of green bush merging into purple forest above which a low bank of cloud trailed fleeces of the same grape-like hue. That cloud imprisoned the dust that rose from volcanic earth powdered by the trampling column; it was burdened with odours of bruised, aromatic shrubs that bled oily sap as they passed. The dust, and this drift of heavy essences, made the air dense and lifeless; and the land, too, seemed destitute of life, though once it had been inhabited, as Jim guessed from the thong-bound fire-hollowed cylinders of tree-trunks suspended by natives in the branches of high thorn-trees and scarlet-flowered spathodeas to tempt the bees to build their combs of wild honey. In patches another hot odour of death filled the air, rising foully from the bloated or desiccated carcases of horses and mules and oxen that had fallen beside the track. One swollen creature Jim noticed particularly. It had no tail; for some thrifty Dutchman had cut it off for a fly-switch. Three rivers they crossed; but though the rains had barely ceased, their beds were of dry, bleached stones. Then the sun burst out, and all life that there was seemed to blench beneath it. No sound could be heard but the soft thud of leather and unshod hoofs upon sand; the crackling of boughs in the bush, as the flankers, thrown out to protect the main column from surprise, broke through them, and, faint in the distance, the monotonous calling of horn-bills, that amphoric note which Jim came to know as the spirit of dry, desert places.

By midday the lean faces of the Kalaharis were so plastered with a compost of sweat and dust that they looked like Red Indians; beneath it the eyes of many of them were pale, for the heat of this sudden exertion had nursed into life the spores of malaria which had lain dormant during their stay in the highlands. By evening no less than five men of Jim's small detachment had been sent back, blanched and shivering, into Martock's care; yet to most of these marching men sunset came with incredible relief. With the cessation of blinding light and cruel heat, life flowed back into their aching bodies.

Night fell, blue-black, as they halted, and camp-fires shone out everywhere. A sweet reek of woodsmoke arose. From the neighboring lines of the Baluchis there came a ceaseless, shrill clamour, for all the world like that of a congregation of starlings that blackens the sky, then swoops to the reedbeds at sunset. Jim and Furnival lay wrapped in their blankets like old campaigners. The night was hellishly cold.

And the next day more torrid than ever. They crossed more rivers, brimmed, here, with green, icy water from the mountain's glaciers. Wherever that water ran, the dead bush came alive in a flutter of gaudy butterfly-wings and blue-mailed dragon-flies, in fierce blossoms flaunting amid a heavier green, in the cool purring of ring-doves. A new range of mountains reared itself in the southern sky as they dropped to the plains: the Pare Hills, in which Sheppard had told them the Germans were lying. From those high observation posts the enemy must surely have seen the dust of the invading column; for now the red sand of the foothills had given place to cotton-soil that curled up in clouds black as soot. Yet never a shot was fired. The suspense of the enemy's inactivity was sinister.

At midnight, on May the twenty-third, the invasion began. Within ten days its first impetus had carried Sheppard's Brigade, with Jim's Kalaharis as its spearhead, through more than a hundred and fifty miles of virgin country as deadly as any in Africa. In Jim's memory it remained, not as any connected period of time, but as a series of scattered incidents in one prolonged dream of tense, interminable effort, posed against the background, ever changing yet ever the same, of golden grasslands and silvery bush; of a winding, impetuous river, now near, now far, yet ever present to the parched imagination in a vision of greener trees in whose shadow temptation and death were always lurking; of men with cracked lips and bleared eyes staggering on till they dropped; of pitiful transport beasts floundering knee-deep in sand, and others, more fortunate, that lay with frothed mouths and glazed eyes black with flies and blue tongues protruded; of suns that rose on new landscapes of an incredible, golden calm, when the world seemed to carry the bloom of new birth, like an opening flower or a newly-hatched butterfly's wing—a calm which, as like as not, would be suddenly broken by the boom of the invisible enemy's naval guns and the shriek of shells that ripped the blue tissue of sky like tearing silk, or the whip-crack of snipers' bullets snapping in the air, or a rattle of maxim-fire simultaneous with shots that smote them like a sudden hailstorm launched from the cloudless heaven.

Then men who had been marching together in silence, or chatting of small things, would scatter into open formation and drop down on their bellies, or stare with mild wonder at a hit limb, or sink forward, dead, in the dust, without a cry. And the mules would stamp and whinny with fright as the packs were torn from their backs and machine-gun tripods dragged into action.

Then Jim and Furnival would shatter the silence anew with their own stuttering fire, spraying the calm landscape blindly with continuous streams of lead and nickel, till the maxim-barrels grew blue with heat, or the damned things jammed, or the fire of the enemy, for some mysterious reason, ceased. And then silence ensued . . . a bland silence of sun-drenched air, now permeated by that smell of iodine and blood which is the odour of battle, to be broken again by Martock, snapping out angry orders to his stretcher bearers, and the dead being carried back, and the men who were hit still gazing curiously at their helpless limbs with a pallid smile on their lips, or gasping and coughing frothed blood as they spoke from a wounded lung, till Martock stopped their mouths upon pain of death. And then skirmishers, creeping forward, with a kindly gesture for Jim and a compression of the lips at the sight of the dead men on stretchers and the dabble of blood marking Martock's brown arms as they passed; and the trim, dandiacal figure of Colonel Essex enquiring, with a smile of faint mockery on his thin lips, how many had been hit, and who.

"Well, Redlake," he would say, "you've silenced the beggars anyway."

"The barrel's red-hot. The gun jammed, sir."

"They always do. I wish we could snaffle some new ones."

Jim's own reaction to his first taste of fire was curious. Its impact threw him into a state of acute self-consciousness which made him seem as much the central figure of the whole event as if it had been planned to give him a private demonstration of what war was like. "So it's come at last!" he thought, with a kind of mild wonder. "This is the real thing. I'm under fire. Now I *know!*" And his mind made a swift comparison between what he had expected to feel—the emotions of the soldiers at Ulm in *War and Peace*—and what he actually felt. "I don't feel in the least like Prince Andrew or Nicholas Rostov," he thought. "I don't want to distinguish myself or die for my king. If I could, I'd burrow down into the earth or run like a hare." He found that some instinct, swifter than thought, had already taken charge of his body and flung him face downward. "Good God, this won't do," he suddenly realized, "I've got to bring my guns into action, and set an example." Example, indeed! His men were already setting an example to him. In a dazed, automatic way, he found himself giving orders, performing the series of actions which habit dictated, while he thought: "These damned Germans are firing at me . . . at *me!* It's fantastic!" A spent bullet sang past his ear like a monstrous wasp; the next man to him, feeding the belt, swayed and pitched into him, hit in the shoulder. At that moment, for the first time, Jim felt angry. "The damned swine!" he thought; and the anger in his brain took shape in a wild desire to hit back; the desire to kill or disable the enemy who was firing on him found release and expression in the deafening stutter of his own maxim, three hundred explosions a minute, and assured him that he was giving back as much as he got. Now excitement grew greater than fear: a madness, almost exhilarating, that left him shattered, trembling, yet, curiously, smiling, when the enemy ceased firing. "It's over," he thought, triumphantly, "and I suppose I'm alive!"

Too soon—for at the very moment, the Germanis' fire crackled out again: from the flank, this time, enfilading; and the struggle began once more.

For, as the Punjabi had said in the train, you never knew where they were. The first sign of their presence was usually a torrent of fire that took toll before Jim had an idea they were near. It was the uncertainty of this dirty bush-fighting that told on men's nerves even more than its dangers. At no moment of day or night could they relax their watchfulness. Through the bush they moved blindly into the jaws of prepared positions whose ranges were marked as precisely as those of a fortress's guns. At times, when the density of the bush compelled them to halt till a way could be hacked through its thickets of thorn, its spears of wild sisal set like a *chevaux-de-frise*, the oppressive, immobilizing power of that stubborn growth would make Jim long to burst out into one of the natural clearings, the slades of meadow-like grasses with which it was scattered, if only for the luxury of filling his lungs with draughts of clean air. But the wisdom of experience in bush-fighting, as taught by Essex and Carlow and that slim old warrior Macdiarmid, had shown him that these tempting open spaces were more deadly than entanglements of the densest thorn, opening fields of fire for the German's emplaced machine-guns, and giving them the unusual privilege of a visible target. It was their part, he learned, to match the invisibility of the unseen enemy.

So day after day dragged on in an endless blaze of sunshine; the waxing moon, on whose light Smuts had counted to prolong their marching hours, silvered the bush at night. Forced march followed forced march. When they left the river they marched twenty miles and more in a day on the tepid contents of a waterbottle apiece.

Rations failed them. Their pace had outshot the utmost speed of their transport, now floundering helplessly, a welter of dying beasts and smashed axles, two days' march behind. And the bush never ended, nor even, sensibly, thinned. Apart from one day, in which the Kashmiri Rifles took the lead, the Ghurkas carving a way through its barriers with their *kukris*, it seemed to Jim almost as if the Kalaharis alone were engaged in this desperate enterprise.

Except for a few tired moments at night, when few had energy left for connected speech, Jim scarcely spoke with a soul outside his own detachment, much less with men of the other regiments in the brigade. It was more than a week since he had seen any sign of the Staff, whose superior knowledge and wisdom, presumably, gave his blind movements direction. The spearhead in flight knew nothing of the shaft behind it. Yet the shaft was there, as heavily weighted with metal as a Masai war-spear. Behind the advancing screen of flesh and fire that the Kalaharis spread like a fan between rail and river, the track in the virgin bush which their leather-shod feet, the first in all time, had marked like the faint pencil line of an uncertain draughtsman, was being trodden in deep and widened by the regiments that followed on foot, by the mules of the mountain-batteries, by the bullock-waggons of the Brigade's massed transport, by the Divisional Reserve, and finally, when the passing of these had obliterated every obstruction, turning the winding track which Jim and his comrades had made into a straight roadway, by the wheels of the armoured cars, the huge grey motor supply-lorries, the field guns and howitzers of the Divisional Artillery.

Kraut knew his job. With Hannyngton threatening his left in the Pare Hills and Sheppard's brigade pushing down through the dense bush beside the Pangani at a speed that belied every calculation of what flesh and blood could achieve, all hopes of holding the Tanga line soon vanished. The most he could hope for now was to withdraw his force, his guns, his ammunition, his stores, by the trolley line to Handeni and the Central Railway. The contest resolved itself, as Sheppard had told the Kalaharis, into a race between men and machines, between railway transport and hard-driven flesh and blood. The result, by every criterion of military experience, could hardly be doubted. In a country provided with roads the task that Smuts set his troops would have been, at best, a forlorn hope; in that trackless land it surpassed human possibility.

Yet the First East African Brigade very nearly achieved the impossible. In the first stages of the movement Kraut trusted, not without reason, to his ally the bush, retreating along his railway, blowing up each bridge as the rolling stock cleared it. On the seventh day of the invasion, where the river swerved eastward to touch the railway, enclosing the British in a bottleneck between itself and the mountains, he stood and fought.

It was an ugly business. On one side the impassable river, on the other the mountains, from whose peaks the Kalaharis, advancing blindly, were plainly visible to the German artillery observers. The railway was so near that their naval guns, mounted on trucks, could command the whole front of the advance with a steady fire of high explosive. In the rear the ochreous dust of the British transport, silting into the bottleneck, set an obvious range. Invisible, unapproachable, beyond the green screens of the river, machine-gun fire enfiladed them. Though they fought all that day Jim never saw a living German, nor any sign of them but the bursting shells, the sleet of maxim-fire, and the white puffs of signal smoke that drifted away from the observation posts, high up on the hillsides, that directed their fire. The Kalaharis pushed forward slowly; a few even reached the railway—the grass-grown narrow-gauge line that was the prize of their fighting. Furnival, Carlow, the second in command, and one of the Engelbrecht brothers were wounded. Martock set up a little dressing-station, sheltered with huge-ribbed palm-fronds, in a dry *nullah* running to the river close behind them. Jim could hear them all talking and laughing, rather excitedly, as their wounds were dressed and Martock's stretcher-bearers carried the dead men back and laid them in the same place.

One of these was a particular favourite of Jim's, a Scotch motor-mechanic named Hunter. Jim had noticed him haggard and shivering with fever that morning and begged him to go back along the field-telephone wire to the ambulance. But he wouldn't. He had a conceited conviction that nobody else could deal with a jammed machine-gun. And when the gun jammed, as it always did, Jim had seen him collapse, his cracked lips still open, with a bullet in his brain. He lay there in the hollow, where the others were laughing and talking, hardly more haggard in death than he had been in life.

Back came Furnival with his bandaged arm. The wound was a mere nothing, he said, but valuable as a memento of the occasion, and worth a wound-stripe. In the failing light the German fire broke out again like the crackle of dry brushwood burning. It sounded just spiteful and futile now, for they were shooting high. Twigs, cut by the bullets, fell listlessly out of the trees on their helmets. A small reconnoitring detachment that had gone forward with Macdiarmid returned. They had crept for nearly half a mile along the railway in the failing light till they came to a truck derailed in the haste of the retirement. The truck was empty, worse luck, Macdiarmid told them, as if he had expected to find it full of champagne. They reported this news to Headquarters. In answer, Headquarters ticked out a laconic order for them to retire to the hilly ground behind them.

To retire—at the very moment when they had reached their objective? It was unbelievable! What the devil did those people behind know about it, anyway? They all grumbled at the thought of giving up what they had won so hardly. In the shadows of acacias by the river it was almost pitch-dark, the stream itself showed a surface of polished ebony. Until they were forced to climb the slope they had no idea how tired they were.

The bush opened out into a wide, tree-scattered hilltop, so crowded with dark shapes that it seemed as if the whole brigade were already encamped there. The blackness of night was full of an enormous confusion. Men were shouting and cursing in Dutch, in English, in Hindustani, and in Swahili. The fact that no lights could be shown increased the plunging chaos of ambulance-waggons and bullock carts and sweating mule-teams. Along the southern slope of the hill an Indian regiment had thrown up hasty entrenchments behind which the rest of the brigade blundered blindly in search of their stations, like the units of a routed army rather than of one that had fought and, as Jim supposed, had won an engagement.

"If their gunners got on to us now," Jim thought, "they'd make mincemeat of us."

But they didn't. By this time Kraut had abandoned his rearguard action. Through that night his big naval guns—Whistling Willies they called them—were being hurried south down the railway; those twelve hours of respite in the bottleneck had given him his chance, and Kraut took it.

That night the Kalaharis lay down as dry as the desert that named them; without water, without food, for Langford, with their rations, had been benighted and entangled in the block that had thrown all the transport into confusion. Martock scoured the whole hilltop vainly in search of water for his wounded, whose mouths were parched by injections of morphine. Not even the ambulance could supply him, for most of the zinc *pakhals* in which water was carried on muleback had leaked themselves empty, and some had been drained with holes pierced by machine-gun bullets.

"If only," Jim thought, "we had filled our bottles at the river!"

But how could one think of things like that under fire? As a matter of fact neither he nor Furnival nor any of their detachment had moistened their lips for sixteen hours. Twelve more were to pass before they tasted food.

All through that night the dark confusion continued as unit after unit poured into their perimeter camp. It was punctuated by a series of hollow, vast detonations. The Germans were blowing up railway bridges, one by one, as they retreated. At dawn, straggling trains of transport continued to roll up. Still hungry, the battalion paraded; but this time, the advanced position had been given to the South African Division, which continued the steady pursuit that night had broken.

To Jim, descending by daylight the track up which they had climbed so desperately overnight appeared strangely easy. An hour's march brought the Kalaharis to the position from which they had been ordered to retire, the trampled grass, the spent ammunition, the blood-stained hollow of Martock's advanced dressing-station. They fell out for a moment to fill their bottles at the river. Not even nectar could have tasted more divinely. A little later they crossed the Germans' abandoned trenches and machine-gun emplacements.

"If we'd known where the blighters were," said Furnival regretfully, "we might easily have turned their flank, working down the railway."

But they hadn't known where they were; and never, in this campaign, would they know where they were. . . .

Colonel Essex rode up alongside, as trim as ever. Even in that howling confusion on the hilltop he had found time to shave. He brought with him an order of commendation from Brigade Headquarters for the Kalaharis' machine-gunners. Their resistance, it seemed, had hampered the enemy's counter-attacks, and permitted the rest of the brigade to turn his right. Though Jim had been partly responsible for this, he had no idea that their work had been particularly valuable, nor even that there had been any fighting other than their own little "scrap." When the enemy fired on them they had fired back. That was all he knew about it. And that, he thought, was the queerest thing about war: when you imagined you were being important, you counted for nothing; when you merely did obvious things, Brigade took notice of you. As a reward for his wound, Furnival got a Military Cross. He was fortunate; for in those early days of the East African campaign, such honours were rare.

As they marched along, parallel with the railway, one thing at least appeared certain. The Germans had abandoned it for good and all, as was shown by the vast upheavals of masonry and twisted roadrails where bridges spanning the Pangani's tributaries, had been blown up in the night. The worn column of Kalaharis, hungry as they were, marched on with a lightened spirit. The consciousness that the South Africans had now shot ahead of them, the unusual relaxation of watchful apprehensiveness, was almost intoxicating. The very bush seemed cooler, its dense congregation of grey-green trees less oppressive. In that sweet, bright morning, it was difficult even to believe that they were at war, till, looking up to the brilliant sky, Jim saw it befouled with whorls of vultures hovering over the abandoned German dead, and later, as, drooping with tiredness, they slouched into the new camp at Buiko, the enemy welcomed them with a slow, sullen, dropping fire from his naval guns.

That evening, when the whole regiment paraded for the first time since the invasion began, they were shocked to realize that in little more than a week it had lost, by death, wounds, or sickness, one third of its effective strength.

IV. *The Grey Bush*

SUFFICIENT, indeed, for that night and for the following day, was the accomplishment symbolized by the abandoned station, with its litter of torn records and telegrams; the empty mission-house with its broken mosquito-screens; the water-tower, which, in their wild haste, the enemy had failed to destroy—above all, the bewildering relief of feeling themselves at last immune from surprise. Next morning not only a few scanty rations but mail-bags arrived.

Jim had hoped for a letter from Catherine. There was nothing for him but one from Miss Minnet, who congratulated him on still living safely at Schoengesicht.

Thorpe Folville, apparently, had now settled down to the war. The Castle gardens, stripped of their flowers, had been turned into fields of potatoes; Ernest was in France, while Edith had atoned for her unfortunate lapse with the gallant Dewpoint by enlisting in the Waacs; the new Daylight Saving Act was a marvellous boon—you could go on with your knitting quite comfortably right up till supper-time. Not a word of the Essendines, or Mrs. Weston or Lucy or Margaret. Mrs. Jewell, however, Jim gathered, was still "rampaging," poking into people's back-kitchens in search of wasted bread. "I am almost beginning to think," Miss Minnet wrote strongly, "that Mrs. Jewell is by nature a *spy* and a *bully*, and the war instead of ennobling her as it should do brings out all her worst qualities."

It was the awakened memory of these familiar, far-off things, that compelled Jim to seek Martock's company rather than Furnival's. They walked round the camp together as Martock went about his business. The Kalaharis' regular M.O. had returned from sick-leave, and Martock, transferred to an Indian Ambulance, had been temporarily appointed Sanitary Officer to the Brigade: a discouraging task—for the Indians' ideas of sanitation were primitive, and beyond this, the camp was now strewn with the carcases of horses and mules and bullocks which had staggered into it to die. Fatigues from each regiment dragged them out into the bush, where, at night, the lions came from the hills to snarl over them. Already the camp was swarming with flies that the Germans had left.

"In another three days," Martock said, "this place will be simply pestiferous."

"By that time," Jim said, "we shall be gone. Smuts is going to cut the light railway that runs to Handeni."

"Cut the railway be damned," Martock answered irritably. "What's he going to cut it with? I've fifty more cases of malaria this morning on sick-parade. The Indians are worse than our chaps; they haven't the sense to protect themselves—Oriental fatalism—and they throw up the sponge more quickly. A sick Indian's the most miserable object I've ever set eyes on. Then, what the devil, I should like to know, are we going to live on? We can't live on the country; the Germanis have stripped it as bare as a flight of locusts. You've seen the villages we've passed—every one abandoned, and all the crops fired or removed. We can't stir without rations. The motor transport's all smashed to hell in the bush; the bullocks and mules are dying like flies. Can't you even believe your own nose? It's impossible to move, I tell you."

"Well, we've done the impossible already," Jim argued.

"Look here, Redlake," said Martock, "there's something else: do you see those damned trees?"—He pointed to the curtain of vivid acacias that hid the Pangani—"Those feathery things with their trunks blotched yellow, like a London plane-tree? Old hands like Macdiarmid tell me that they call them fever-trees. They only grow in places that breed malaria. In the rains this spot is a swamp; and if we stay here, as we've got to, I'm ready to bet you we lose fifty per cent. of our men in a fortnight, without a shot fired. That business has only just begun. You can take my word for it."

"All the more reason to press on," Jim said. "No doubt that's what Smuts has in mind. I imagine that's why he's holding back Brits and the cavalry. They've been waiting up country, outside the fly-belt, until they were wanted; and now, Carlow tells me, they're following close on our heels. At the moment when Van Deventer moves, Smuts'll throw in their weight as well to finish the job we've begun."

"An army marches on its stomach," Martock persisted. "We can't move from this place, any more than Van Deventer can move. We shall stay here a week at least."

On the contrary, they moved next morning. Half rations, or quarter rations, or none: it made no difference. They marched out at dawn, over a fine trestle bridge which the Germans had neglected to destroy, nor was there a word of grumbling from their thinned ranks. Looking backwards across the river Jim saw the last of the camp of Buiko which had given them such precious respite. No halt in that long invasion had been framed in such spectacular sinister loveliness: an oasis of living green between the parched hills and the deadly swamp, with its fringes of fever-trees. Once more they struck out into the wilds, marching straight as an arrow's flight, regardless of swamp or bush or the streams that here fed the Pagani, for their next objective: the narrow-gauge trolley line by which Kraut hoped to evacuate his force from the Tanga Railway. All heavy supply-transport and ambulance waggons were left behind. Speed . . . speed was the only thing that counted in this adventure. In that swampy, low-lying land the heat was suffocating; the moist air rose like steam, alive with glittering dragon-flies.

At evening the exhausted Kalaharis halted and began to dig themselves in. The scene was enchanting: the masses of white cloud spilling over the flat tops of the distant Pare Range and, behind and above them, radiating shreds of mist, a cloudy aurora, later flushed with rose. The black soil made easy digging for their entrenchments. Jim and Furnival dug a hole for their machine-guns, imitating the deserted German emplacements they had seen behind Buiko. Furnival worked like a slave, in spite of his bandaged arm; but Jim couldn't help noticing the ghastliness of his face, the pallor that showed beneath the caked dust and the tan, through which runnels of sweat made irregular streaks of whiteness. When the digging was over he staggered back trembling, as though he could scarcely stand.

"Look here, old chap, you'd better lie down," Jim said.

"Mind your own bloody business," Furnival snapped irritably; and when Jim persisted he broke out into a torrent of bitter blasphemy so unlike him that Jim knew he was on the verge of delirium. He saw his whole body shaken by a sudden and violent rigor. The fever shook him as a terrier shakes a rat; though he clenched his jaw his teeth chattered.

"Very pretty!" Jim heard, in the clipped, precise tones of Colonel Essex. He sprang up and saluted. Even Furnival, with a prodigious effort, pulled his shaking limbs together. "A pretty emplacement, Redlake," the colonel smiled; "but I'm afraid we've got to go on; so your work is wasted."

Beside him, in curious contrast with his own immaculate neatness, stood a tall, sallow, wasted figure in a torn khaki uniform without any marks of rank. In the rear of this apparition clustered a company of ragged, half-naked savages, carrying haversacks, rifles, stray oddments of German kit.

"This is Major Pretorius," Essex said.

Jim saluted again; this tall spectre smiled wanly in return. Jim was thrilled to gaze at him; for Pretorius, with his crew of savages, was perhaps the most striking figure of that romantic campaign: a great hunter, the hero of a hundred hair-breadth escapes and feats of incredible daring. At that moment, like some shabby, bedraggled bird, he had swooped into the Kalaharis' lines from the heart of the bush. For the last four days he had been slinking round the enemy's rear, a hazardous venture for a man with a price on his head. Now, coolly as if he were relating some schoolboy's prank, he told them, in his halting guttural English, how, on the way back, he had found himself in the rear of a German patrol, and followed them up from behind at a distance of a few hundred yards.

"If they'd thought of turning," he said, "they could easily have seen me. But they didn't. I gave them four shots, and made four bull's eyes." He laughed. "If you don't believe me," he said, "look here!" And he showed them four metal identity discs and an officer's haversack stuffed with maps, cigarettes, a sausage and a Thermofix flask still full of hot coffee.

"But the point of it is this," Colonel Essex explained. "He says that the Germans are advancing in force down both sides of the river; so we must move up to support the Baluchis at once. Better luck next time, Redlake!"

He moved on with Pretorius, the savages trailing behind them. While Jim collected his men and made them fall in again, he saw, in the tops of the trees that bordered the river, an enormous family of baboons swinging themselves along, and wondered on what secret mission of their own they were moving forward. He helped Furnival, still protesting, to his feet. He was white as death; but when Jim implored him to fall back, or, at least, get a dose of quinine from Martock, his friend relapsed into a grim, malignant sulk and refused to answer.

They marched on. That day the setting of the sun brought them no relief. On their left the Pangani fell through a series of thunderous rapids. The sound of its water was a torture to their parched mouths. It was midnight before, by forced marching, they caught up with Baluchis. Some unexplained circumstance, it seemed, had made Kraut change his mind; the advance in force, which Pretorius had reported, was not taking place, and Sheppard, taking swift advantage of this indecision, had himself decided to throw forward a flying column—the Baluchis, the Punjabis and half of a mountain battery—to make one last, desperate attempt to cut off Kraut's retreat. After resting for a couple of hours, the Kalaharis would follow in support of them as best they could.

Jim made his way back from headquarters armed with the new orders. He found Furnival stretched where he had crept, like a dying animal, under a thorn-tree whose spined branches swept the ground. He tugged at his shoulder. Furnival answered fiercely with a confusion of violent words that made no sense. Jim ran back and fetched Martock.

"Cerebral malaria," he said shortly, with a glance at Jim that reminded him of their talk two days before. "When did it start?" he asked.

"This morning."

"Damned fool! Why didn't he report?"

"He wouldn't."

"Fetch a stretcher. We can't carry him with us. We shall have to dump him here to wait till the ambulance comes up. I'll leave a sick orderly with him."

Furnival struggled as they lifted him, till Martock, cursing his head off, reduced him to silence. He was carried back on the stretcher, uncaring and helpless now as if he were already dead.

At two in the morning the march began again on an empty stomach, for the last emergency ration had been eaten during their brief halt at sunset eight hours before. Even their water-bottles were empty. At this point the banks of the river were unapproachable. So on, until midday, they marched—perhaps fifteen miles; it was impossible to estimate distance in the darkness. During the night, Jim's detachment had shed more than a dozen men as desperately ill as Furnival. One by one they staggered up to Jim in the dark and saluted, trembling.

"I'm afraid I'm finished, sir," they said. They had been finished long before that.

"All right, fall out!" Jim would say. "Keep awake if you can, and look out for lions. Don't try to walk back. There's an ambulance somewhere behind us. Good luck to you!"

They smiled and dropped down in the bush at the side of the track, as though the spine-scattered earth were grateful as a feather-bed.

The track crossed a swamp with a fringe of fourteen-foot elephant grass. They were nearer now to the river, and beyond it a mountain that was marked on the map as Mafi, most beautifully blue and wooded, rose into the hot air. On a projecting spur of it a scar of rock stood out white against the dark forest foliage. A naval gun started sullenly shelling them from those hills. They marched close to the elephant grass, where no observer could see them, and no dust rose, for the soil was moist and tenacious. It didn't matter much, anyway, for the guns' range was faulty, and many of the shells, unexploded, buried themselves in the black earth. The whole column was now very quiet; no sound but the swish of feet through the grass, a soft continuous rustle only broken by the detonations of bursting shells.

But if they were undisturbed by the firing other creatures were not. Flights of weaver-birds crossed their path, shrilling on their way to the river, and after them came several couples of ring-doves, pearly-grey. Once more they diverged from the stream and plunged into thickets of thorn-bush denser than Jim had ever known. Even the sardonic Macdiarmid found them exasperating. "You can thank your stars you're hunting Gerrmans, not buffalo!" he said. "They won't be expecting us this way. That's one consolation."

There was no other. It was as though they were cutting their way through solid miles of a quickset hedge, on which the passage of the Indians before them had left no sign save, here and there, an acacia-branch bleeding red sap where the Ghurkas' *kukris* had hacked it. With every moment the heat grew more intense; the air was saturated with hot smells of trampled undergrowth till it tasted foul, as though it had been breathed and re-breathed by every suffocating living thing in the wilderness before it reached their panting lungs. Their halts were frequent. Sometimes the track seemed to turn backward—how often they could not tell, since nothing was visible, besides the bush, but the low-roofed, flawless sky.

Would it never end? Jim thought. Poor old Furnival was well out of this! Its monotony ended, at least, with a sudden rattle of machine-guns, not very distant; and this sound, which suggested some new if desperate form of activity, was a positive relief. It whipped up their deadened nerves to a renewed, incredible exertion. The tired Kalaharis strained forward like horses that smell their stables, as if food and rest rather than possible destruction awaited them. The Baluchis, no doubt, were in action. Perhaps they had reached the bridge? Perhaps Kraut was fighting a covering rearguard action some miles in front of it? No one knew. They only knew that this long, blind monotony was over.

The fighting was nearer ahead than Jim had imagined. The head of the column burst out suddenly into a sandy clearing, where Page, whose ambulance had been attached to the flying column, was already busy dressing the first Baluchi wounded. He looked paler, more hopelessly unmilitary than ever. His sleeves were rolled up over dead-white arms, and this made his tanned wrists and hands look as if they were covered in dark kid gloves. As Jim and his men went past at a double he stared at them, with wide-eyed wonder, through spectacles spattered with drying blood.

A procession of stretchers hurrying back from the Baluchis' front delayed their advance. In the first impact two British officers had been killed. Another of the Twenty-ninth came swinging past on a stretcher, his eyes closed, his lips clenched with pain. Jim recognized him as the subaltern who had travelled up in the train with him and Furnival. A Baluchi Jemadar came running along the track, shouting voluble news of the fighting in Hindustani, waving in the air a stump from which most of the hand had been torn. New maxim fire opened on the left, from beside the river. A patrol of Ghurkas was driven in on them. One explained, in broken English, that the enemy were attacking in force on that side. Essex, patiently listening, sent him on to report to headquarters. He seemed glad of any excuse to get out of the fire, which now quickened on the left, wounding several of the Kalaharis.

But still they marched on. Their orders were to support the Baluchis wherever they might be.

A series of louder reports drowned that of machine-guns and rifles. It came from a sudden clearing in which the mountain battery was in action. The beautiful mules that were their pride stood shivering and stamping. The battery appeared to be firing blindly on the German positions in front. The Hundred and thirtieth had struck it hot, the gunners told them: one double company practically wiped out in the first burst of fire; the usual trap—a tempting open space, with the ranges all marked, and massed machine-guns sweeping it almost point blank. But the Germans were still there, thank heaven! Baluchi patrols had seen howitzers crossing the bridge. "We're trying to liven things up with shrapnel," said the battery-commander; "but all we've done yet is to set a damned village on fire. It's the first chance of a show that we've had since Latema."

An officer of Sheppard's staff walked up dragging his horse behind him. The beast was frothing at the mouth in the first stages of horse-sickness and the bush made riding impossible. He halted the Kalaharis.

"Good work!" he said. "We didn't suppose you'd be up for another two hours. The Hundred and thirtieth have turned the first line of trenches, and Kraut hasn't cleared his guns yet. It's slow work, dirty fighting. You stay here," he told Essex, "till you're ordered to move up in support. I'm off down the line to see what they're doing on the left. We've a report that says the blighters have crossed the river."

He set off at a run; the horse stumbled on behind him listlessly.

"Yon beast'll be dead before morning," Macdiarmid remarked. "I doubt he's in luck to be out of it. Better that than starvation. Did ye notice his ribs?"

A string of Indians, walking-wounded, came past, looking pale beneath their brown skins, exchanging friendly grins with the Sikhs of the Mountain Battery. They, too, seemed to be glad they were out of it. And, all the time, with the precision of a piece of fine clockwork, the mountain-guns dropped round after round of smooth little shells, at full range, on the Germans' light railway. No gun-fire answered them. Only, from time to time, the rattle of maxim and rifles swelled to a sudden crescendo, as though the wind caught the sound and swept it toward or away from them.

Then the order to advance came through, and, all of a sudden, the men of the Kalaharis, who had been lying like scattered dead, jumped to their feet. The delayed call to action worked in them like a stimulant. A rumor ran through the ranks, born heaven knows where, that the Hundred and thirtieth had finally "got in behind them": the light railway was cut, and all Kraut's rearguard surrounded.

Rumour lied. The counter-attack on the British left, the beginnings of which Jim had seen in passing, had held up the advance. Incidentally it had mopped up poor spectacled Page's dressing-station. As they emerged into the open they could see the German bridge-head, a chaos of overturned trucks and uprooted rails. The village that the mountain battery had set on fire was still blazing; black clouds hung in the air above it as from a burned rickyard. The open ground was scattered with German dead and with dead Baluchis. But the living Germans were gone. By the skin of their teeth Kraut's rearguard had managed to withdraw. Smut's first turning movement, whose success should have crowned their two hundred miles' march, had failed.

The reaction, naturally, was terrific. As the Kalaharis marched in to the shell-shattered railhead through the clouds of acrid smoke that still rolled away from the smouldering *bandas* of the village, the impulse which had spurred them onward at a double into the firing-line failed. All the spring had gone out of their bodies, the light out of their eyes. They marched with the weary, despondent air of convicts in a chain-gang dragging back to their prison after a day of forced labour. To them, Jim included, this unsuccessful incident, which was, in fact, a mere skirmish on the ultimate fringe of the forgotten East African front, represented the crucial engagement of the whole world-war—an action beside which the Battle of Jutland, news of which had lately filtered through to the brigade, seemed a matter of minor importance. The blood and the sweat of their fortnight's forced march of two hundred miles had been spilled in vain.

"As far as the end of this damned campaign is concerned it's just 'as you were,'" Carlow told Jim gloomily as he rode beside him on a skeleton grey, the last survivor but one of the regiment's horses: "'As you were'—with lengthened connections, no rations, and half our strength gone for nothing! Why the devil old Smuts didn't bring up the cavalry is what beats me. If we'd fetched up here four hours sooner we should have had them cold. It's no damned use pushing on; Kraut's got clean away from us. His main force must have reached Handeni by now. There's no water to speak of for forty odd miles, Pretorius says. It seems foolish to leave the river—but I suppose they know best."

The country, that evening, seemed lovelier to Jim than ever, the dense bush opening into wide park-land scattered with thorn. A warm breeze, blowing from the South, swept clean the high sky through which, like great silvery herons drifting home at sunset, two Bristol biplanes returned from watching the enemy's retreat. The men of the Kalaharis turned up their faces to gaze at them.

"I bet you it's nice and cool up there," Jim heard one say.

As he looked at the pale eyes upturned in their blistered dust-caked faces, he saw written in them the utter fatigue of their hungry, sun-tortured, harassed brains which had never yet found, and would never find, expression in words of complaint. Those eyes, indeed, were the only thing human about them; for their bodies moved onward now beneath their load of equipment like clockwork automata propelled by a rhythm which, if once it were broken, would cease for ever—automata fashioned by some fantastically macabre imagination to people a nightmare they seemed; for these starveling blackened bodies were shrivelled to bone and sinew like those of mummies, made more than human in stature by the tall crests of grass and foliage which they had plucked and reared in their helmets to camouflage their secret movements through bush and grass-land.

So the silvery planes drifted over and back to their roosts. They would have to fly eighty miles before they found a safe landing in this wilderness of bush. The high droning of their exhausts had hardly died away before the stutter of another engine was heard. A grey Vauxhall staff-car came bumping over the tussocky ground beside them in bottom-gear. Jim saw it approach with a flush of annoyance. "These blighters!" he thought. "They move us about like flags on their damned war-maps. Twenty miles in a day! They've no idea what it means. Then, when all the fighting is over, they roll up like this on pneumatic tyres just to see if we're where they put us, then go back to slap-up dinner and stretcher beds. I know these red-hats! I suppose I shall have to salute them, though."

Jim halted as the staff-car drew abreast. Between him and it the moving column of his own detachment streamed past like a frieze portraying the essence of human fatigue. He couldn't help feeling, at that moment, what men on all fronts of all wars past and present had felt: the bitterness of the contrast between the lot of the burdened, foot-slogging infantry and those who imposed their movements. This time it was some general or other; the oak-leaves on the brass hat caught his eye at once. Then his tired limbs stiffened to an unusual attention; as his hand came up to the salute his heart beat faster, and the blood that flushed his brain awakened in it a queer feeling of exultation and excitement mingled with pride in the tattered ranks of his little command; for he knew, at a glance, that the two bearded occupants of the staff-car were none other than the Commander-in-Chief, Jan Smuts, and Collyer, his Chief of Staff.

It was the first time that Jim had set eyes on the romantic and inspiring figure of Smuts. He saw a shortish, wiry, middle-aged man, with a face heavily-lined and a pointed red beard streaked with grey, less impressive in every physical detail than his companion. At that moment this aspect of the man had no importance. Jim saw him surrounded by the aura of his own hero-worship—that passion to which men cling so blindly in times of stress—as the physical embodiment of that will to conquer which had sustained them through the purgatory of the Pangani trek.

The mere sight of that closely-knit figure instantly quickened his drooping enthusiasm, dispelled his fatigue. This man was not merely a human being but a cause and a will incarnate. His bodily presence revived Jim's faith and steeled his spirit to new endurance, as the spirit and faith of saints and martyrs has been strengthened to a degree more than human by divine apparitions. His voice trembled with pride as he gave the command "Eyes right!" and the weary column obeyed him. His mind and body glowed with an intoxicating enthusiasm. Under this man's command he was ready and willing to subject himself to any conceivable torture or mutilation, to welcome death itself as a glorious sacrifice.

Smuts returned the salute automatically with one swift glance that seemed scarcely to interrupt the inscrutable trend of his thought; yet something of the vehement passion which thrilled Jim at that moment must have reached him; for, as the sad column turned its pale eyes in his direction, he murmured a word to Collyer, who stopped the car and beckoned to Jim. Jim slipped through the moving ranks and stood beside him abashed by the scrutiny of visionary eyes that, while they looked into his, seemed to see far beyond him. Smuts spoke in a voice that was slightly guttural.

"What is your name?"

Jim told him. A flicker of recognition passed over the general's eyes. Jim would not have been surprised to hear the familiar words: "Are you any relation?"

"Your regiment," he heard instead, "has had a pretty rough time of it. You may take that as a compliment. There's no other brigade in the field I could have asked so much of. It's just a piece of bad luck that we didn't pull it off. Have you much malaria yet?"

"A good deal, I'm afraid, sir."

"Have you plenty of quinine?"

"Yes. Of course, sir, the men kick against it."

"I know. But you've got to insist on it. We've a lot of campaigning in front of us. I can't give you any respite yet. We still have a chance. You're not a South African?"

"No. English, sir."

"Seen service in France?"

"No, sir. I joined up in Capetown."

"Well, you'll get to France yet." He signed to the driver to proceed. "You'd better hang on to the footboard," he said, "till we catch up your men."

Jim did so. The car swayed forward; but from that moment the general seemed to have forgotten him, withdrawing himself into the secret meditations that knitted his brows. When they overtook the column, still grimly marching, and Jim dropped from the footboard to give his final salute, it was only returned by Collyer: his Chief sat apparently unconscious of it, staring before him.

Yet, as Jim's tired limbs settled once again into the monotonous rhythm of the march, his mind was so set on fire by this encounter—more stirring, strangely enough, than any of the adventures he had left behind him—that he was hardly aware of the hunger, the thirst, the unspeakable weariness which he had felt before. It was transported with fervid hope, with pride, with determination, with confidence in the unquestionable wisdom and military genius of that grave, red-bearded figure.

That night, encamped by the bed of a stream, now a series of muddy pools made turbid with frog-spawn, over which a fever-racked major kept irritable watch as though it were a classic vintage of Imperial Tokay, they hungrily waited for rations that never appeared. The worn Kalaharis lay scattered along the stream. The blessing of cooler air aroused them to a kind of grim humour, which they expended elaborately on the subject of their empty stomachs. It was something to have water, even when its consistency was that of coffee-grounds. The younger Engelbrecht produced from his haversack a stick of *biltong*, dried venison, which he offered to share with Jim.

"It's not too bad when you chew it," he said. "Tastes just like beef-tea."

But Jim couldn't touch it. The irritable major's foul water had sickened his stomach. There was a taste in his mouth that he associated with the idea of frog-spawn, and his mind, now swayed by the body's disgust, lost, all of a sudden, the rapturous mood which his vision of Smuts had given it, being full of a vague apprehensiveness, a brooding foreknowledge of evil which he couldn't dispel.

"Either something damnable is going to happen to all of us," he thought, "or else I'm going to be ill. But I *mustn't* be ill!" he told himself emphatically. "I've no business to think of such things. A new movement's beginning, and with poor old Furnival laid out, who the devil's going to run the machine guns if I crock up? It's sheer imagination. I've got to pull myself together."

Though a drenching dew fell, and the air, by contrast with the day's heat, felt icy, his body began to burn; small creeping sensations of pain seemed to crawl up and down the marrow of his bones; the thirst, which he had learnt to subdue, became intolerable; the desires of his mind recurred lustfully, again and again, to that loathsome water; his idea of heaven, at that moment, was to steal down through the dark to the guarded pools, to plunge his body in them and drink them as he lay. But that, as he knew, would be treachery. The foul stuff was rationed, and the small allowance with which he had filled his bottle must suffice for the next twenty-four hours. As he lay there burning, listening to the innumerable nocturnal noises of the bush, the shrill squeaks of quarrelling bats, the high trilling of frogs and cicalas, the metallic rasping of crickets in the grass, and one unfamiliar song that was like an aerial tinkle of silvery bells, each of them took on the colour of his present obsession and seemed to resemble the noises made by water, recalling to his mind a series of evanescent mirages—visions of the peaty runnels that scored the moors at Trewern, of the smooth-flowing flats of Itchen, of his old enemy the Schoengesicht river in flood. Though the rest of his body burned, his stomach seemed burdened as with a block of ice. By midnight this cold discomfort had turned to spasmodic pain. His staggerings back and forth from the edge of the lines disturbed old Macdiarmid.

"What the devil are you up to, Redlake?" he enquired. "Why can't you keep still?"

Jim gave him his excellent reasons.

"Well, it's not over-eating, at any rate. You've probably got dysentery. Go and pull out the doctor."

The doctor, poor devil, had enough on his hands, Jim thought; but by dawn, when he was willing to rouse him, the strength had so oozed from his body that he could not drag himself to Headquarters, where the medical officer slept. He sent along a sergeant to fetch him, and was cursed for his pains.

"You damned fool!" said the doctor. "You're just as bad as the rest of them. Why didn't you come to me in the night? That's what I'm here for. As it is I shall have to leave you behind to be picked up by the ambulance. For God's sake be careful not to infect this water, or there'll be the devil to pay!"

"I expect it'll pass off," Jim said mildly, resigning himself to a hypodermic of emetine and a stiff dose of salts.

"Pass off!" scoffed the doctor. "Pass off! What you mean is that you'll pass *out*. Just lie here in the shade and take another dose of this stuff in four hours' time. If the case runs a normal course you'll be back with us in a week or ten days."

Jim submitted. There was, in fact, nothing else to be done. It was as much as he could do to stagger to the edge of the perimeter, let alone to face a day's march. His mind was too hazy now, and the paroxysms of abdominal pain too intense, for him to know or even to care what was happening about him. Amid the clamorous birdsong of dawn he was vaguely aware of the Kahalaris' bivouac breaking up; of knee-haltered pack-mules, strung together in fours, stamping, whinnying, and biting each other as pack-saddles were dumped on their backs and girths tightened; of a reek of Boer tobacco, offensive to his sick stomach; of a metallic tinkling of bits and clanking of arms and accoutrements. Then, monstrous in the dusk, the grass-plumed, helmeted figures of the battalion's remnant streamed past him, till Langford, mustering his attenuated transport train of bullock-drawn A.T. carts in the rear, turned to wave him a kindly good-bye which he was too weak to return. The creaking of sun-dried axles died away. Apart from a single odorous stretcher bearer, whom the medical officer had left behind to waylay the ambulance, and the unfortunate major, nursing his fever and watching the water from beneath a strip of tarpaulin, Jim was quite alone. He had dropped away from the living organism of the regiment as unnoticed as a rotten branch falling from a tree in the night.

It was only when the dense bush had muffled the last sound of the wheeled transport into silence that Jim realized how much the departing regiment meant to him, how integral a part of its communal life he had become. Although he was not one of its original members and had actually been attached to it for little more than a month, this sudden and violent separation from the Kalaharis affected him with a sense of physical avulsion. His body and spirit had been nourished by the blood that flowed from the regiment's corporate heart; his present detached existence had no more validity than that which sets twitching a lizard's divided tail. Deprived of the infusion of its hopes, its courage, its fortitude, its abounding goodwill and comradeship, his own hope and courage wilted miserably till it seemed a matter of small importance whether he lived or died. At one moment a kind of mad determination seized him to defy his weakness, to stagger to his feet, to follow them, even if he died in the attempt. But when he raised himself to his knees his head swam and his strength collapsed; he fell to the ground and lay there, breathing heavily—just as he had seen Furnival lying, a week before.

So, while the sun rose tremendously, he relapsed into a stupor out of which, as from time to time he opened his blinking eyes, he was aware of what seemed to be an endless procession of dust-coloured phantoms, the ghosts of an army stealing steadily forward. Whenever pain stabbed him awake he became conscious of their soft thudding progress. He saw them like a great reel unwinding, continuous, yet never the same: the swarthy Baluchis of the Hundred and thirtieth; the bearded Sikhs of the Twenty-ninth and the Mountain Battery; the skeletons of all that was left of the Loyal North Lancs and the Fusiliers. They passed with such silent intensity, so little heed for himself, that they seemed less like a living army than a phantasmagoric procession of those who had perished in this strange enterprise, the marching hosts of the dead to which, for all that his dazed brain knew, he might have belonged. With a dreadful, monotonous majesty they passed under the noon-day silence, for one moment visible, then swallowed by the insatiable bush.

The sun was full overhead when the Kavirondo stretcher-bearer aroused him to the sight of a red-cross ambulance waggon drawn by eight mules. A moment later Martock was standing over him.

"I'm afraid I'm in a hell of a mess," Jim excused himself.

Martock laughed. "I expect you are. That's the way with dysentery. No, don't move. There's a stretcher coming."

The stretcher came. As the bearers bent over him Jim was sickened by the effluvium of negro sweat. They hoisted him on to the stretcher and lifted it. A swaying, aerial sensation, not unpleasant. Then, through his closed eyes, he was aware of the shade of the waggon's tilt. A Cape-boy shouted in Dutch to the leaders; a whip-lash cracked in the air like a rifle-bullet; the great wheels began to roll, and the waggon lurched forward.

In the meantime, aided by another hypodermic injection which Martock had given him and which dulled the besetting concern for his personal foulness, Jim relapsed into a state of drugged consciousness verging on sleep, in which the paroxysms of pain whose claws still clutched him seemed to fall on some body that was not quite his own. When he next awoke to the sound of Martock's voice, the rumbling of wheels and the swaying of the long waggon, which was like that of a ship at sea, had ceased. It was an evening of peerless quietude. The ambulance-mules had been unspanned in a little clearing, and though the air under the tilt still held the heat of an oven, the relief of sunset stole gratefully through his blood. Martock stood in the arch of the waggon-tail and spoke to him.

"You're in luck, old fellow," he said. "When we picked you up we hadn't room for more than one stretcher-case. The waggons are full, chock-a-block."

"I'm hellishly thirsty."

"All right. You shall drink in a moment. We've found some passable water, and they're busy boiling it; and then we can clean you up a bit. You seem to be doing quite well. God, you're fuggy in there though! Well, Grierson, how goes it?"

Another voice close to Jim's ear: "Not bad," and he realized, for the first time that day, that he wasn't alone in the ambulance. It was crowded, as a matter of fact, to its full capacity of eight stretcher-cases, and the voice which he heard belonged to the Punjabi subaltern whom he had first met in the train and later seen carried back from the firing line at M'kalamo.

"Good Lord, are *you* here?" Jim said lazily.

"I should damn well think I was!" said Grierson bitterly. "Been here ever since I was hit, the day before yesterday. It's a bloody scandal, carrying all the wounded forward with the brigade like this! We ought to have been back in a clearing-station or a base hospital by now. It strikes me that the Medical Service has broken down. I should like to know the truth about it."

For the next twenty-four hours, in spite of Martock's ministrations, the state of the Medical Service was a matter of indifference to Jim. They passed in a more placid prolongation of the nightmare that had begun in the camp by the dry watercourse, in which he submitted himself to the handling of a stately gentleman with a patriarchal grey beard named Mohammed Hussein, a *babu* of the Indian Subordinate Medical Service attached to the Ambulance. By the end of the third day the violence of the attack had spent itself, and Martock, a little doubtfully, allowed him to leave the hot shelter of the waggon and sleep in the open. As they lay side by side under the stars Martock opened his heart to him on the subject at which the wounded Punjabi officer had hinted: the appalling state of the campaign's medical arrangements.

"I'm only a temporary officer, thank heaven," Martock explained. "That's why I'm in a position to speak out; and as soon as my year's contract's up and I get back to England I mean to do so."

"I don't quite see what difference it makes," Jim said.

"The difference is this. All services have their ups and downs. It just happens that at the time when the heads of the Medical Service entered the corps—the fellows who are running, or supposed to be running, this show—the standard of entrance was a low one. What's the result? The first was the Dardanelles, the second Mesopotamia. And the third is East Africa, which is as bad as either—if not worse. Now if I were a regular I shouldn't dare to protest. My promotion, my whole career would depend on the favour of the self-satisfied duds who are making such a mess of things here. You can take it from me that the organization of the Medical Service is rotten, through and through. I'll give you an example—that fellow who lay next to you, Grierson. Now that boy has a soft-nosed bullet through the upper arm that's smashed the bone to fragments. He was wounded three days ago. By this time he should be in hospital, being dealt with by surgical specialists, not by people like me. The wound is septic. He'll probably lose his arm. But here he is, being carried along with us, getting every day further and further away from the base."

"Why?" Jim asked.

"Why?" Martock repeated indignantly. "*Why?* Because Medical Headquarters is up in Nairobi, in a snug little office five hundred miles from the front, playing billiards or bridge in the club at this very moment! Why? Because those indolent blighters evidently don't realize that in the last three weeks we've moved over three hundred miles into the blue. At this moment the nearest clearing-station is still at the point where we started, right under Kilimanjaro at Kahe! Can I send back a case like Grierson's—and he's one among scores of others—three hundred miles, which means more than a week, in a light Ford ambulance that'll probably break down on the way? We evacuated sick men from Buiko packed like sheep in empty supply-lorries—with cases of dysentery like yours among them; you know what that means! It's murder of the most cruel and most damnable kind, there's no other word for it, Redlake. The campaign's been going on for nearly two years, but Medical Headquarters in Nairobi don't know that it's begun. It's a month, to the day, since we started this new invasion. At this moment there isn't a field hospital within three hundred and fifty miles of the front. And such miles!"

"But surely," Jim began, "a man like Smuts. . ."

"Jan Smuts is a soldier; a brilliant guerrilla leader. In the kind of war he's been used to men carry rations for a month in their saddle-bags, and there's no such thing as an organized medical service. I acquit him absolutely. When he came up here—and I'm told it was against his will—the India Office put into his hands a force that was supposed to be properly equipped for this sort of service, a properly tempered weapon of modern warfare. He's used it already with amazing courage and skill; and if the weapon buckles up in his hand—as it's going to do—you can't blame him. If we're going to strike anything like a big general engagement, with casualties comparable to those we had at Salaita or Latema, I give you my word the medical show will go phut—not because of the country, like the transport, but from sheer, stark lack of prevision and supine incompetence. Another Mesopotomia, as my *babu* calls it! I won't say any more. When I think of it I just see red."

But he did say more. Not five minutes of silence had passed before Jim heard his complaints break out again.

"This breakdown, this awful gap on the L. of C.," he said, "wouldn't be so bad if we were properly equipped at the front. But we aren't. There are just a few things we need in a campaign of this kind: dressings, naturally; quinine, and the one or two drugs you use in treating dysentery. And we're short of all of them already. You Kalaharis are all right; your people at home have taken a pride in equipping you; but the units that came from India haven't even enough quinine to give their sepoys a daily prophylactic dose. The regimental medical officers come round to us begging for it. We complain to Medical Headquarters. They tell us to indent for more. *Indent!*"

He laughed scornfully. "Back goes your slip of paper five hundred miles to some paunchy Hindu in Nairobi who files it for a week or two, then posts it on with the head-quarter's approval to another fat swine in Mombasa where medical stores, I suppose—though one can't be certain—are spoiling on the quay. There, likely as not, they'll find something wrong with the indent; the minor Indian official acquires virtue by quibbling; so, when Mombasa has wrangled with Nairobi on paper for another week or two, the stuff for which you've indented may just possibly be put on the rail and be turned out at some godforsaken place on the Uganda line to make room for the rations and mails which never reach us. There must be tons of medical stores waiting dumped at railhead; but railhead's approximately three hundred miles away from us now, and the thought of that doesn't disturb our Nairobi gentlemen's game of bridge. *Indent!* My dear boy, you can indent till you're blue in the face; and I tell you, we're in for a hell of a mess before long!"

Subsiding into silence on this cheerful note, Martock finally alllowed Jim to sleep. Next morning his strength was so far restored that he was permitted to escape from the waggon, with its imprisoned air made foul by dysentery mingled with the sickening reek of antiseptics and suppuration, and ride Martock's mule at the tail of the long caravan. During the days of his illness his body had been carried unwittingly into a new kind of country. They moved onward now over the semblance of a metalled road through plantations of waving mealies which gave the land an appearance of soft, flourishing, tended greenness. They passed many villages of grass *bandas* shaped like beehives. A bright flower spilled pools of vermilion beside the tawny road. The very butterflies seemed less wild and restless. Most of the villages were deserted. In some of them burnt huts smouldered; for it was the way of the Germans to destroy anything rather than allow it to fall into the invading army's hands.

"It's rough on the natives," Martock told him, "but lucky for us. Our porters and stretcher-bearers can never resist the temptation of taking shelter in a hut, and the walls and floors are swarming with the ticks that carry relapsing fever—another disease, by the way, that the old gentlemen of the I.M.S. have never heard of!"

Yet the pleasant green of the mealie-fields and banana plantations in which the huts were set was deceptive. The mealie-stalks and banana clusters were stripped; no stocks of flour nor of poultry remained in the villages, whose inhabitants, like dishousled birds that still flutter bewilderedly about a ravaged nest, poured out of the ruins to watch the ambulance pass. An aristocratic race they seemed to Jim; erect and slim, in their snowy garments and white lace skull-caps, with something of the Arab's physical distinction in their forms and features. Mile after mile they kept pace with the marching column in absolute silence. As the road dipped between half-grown plantations of rubber and sisal, within sight of the battlements of the gaol and fortified post of Handeni, Jim came suddenly on the first European building they had seen since they left the railway: a long shed, roofed with galvanized iron, which had once formed part of a sisal factory. From this structure a fat little man with a red-cross brassard ran out into the road and accosted Martock.

"*Rothe Kreuz,*" he explained, "Red Cross. I am a doctor and this is a hospital. I find a blood-brother, a medical colleague at last! I want your protection."

"Protection? From whom?" Martock enquired. "Our troops will not touch you."

"Your troops? Ah, no. That I understand," the plump little German protested. "What I want is a guard to protect me from all these natives. You see the High Command has burnt their villages. They will not be rational. They will think it is all my fault. I and my wife are the only Nordics left in Handeni."

He stood with clasped hands, entreating, his pale terrified face oozing grease like a bladder of lard, the first living German that Jim had met in East Africa.

"I should be greatly obliged," he said, "if you would take me prisoner."

"That's hardly my business," Martock replied with a smile. "I'm a non-combatant, like yourself. Quite apart from which, I gather you're in charge of this hospital. How many patients have you?"

"About three hundert. But that is not very important."

"Not very important?" Martock repeated sharply.

"You understand, they are only natives. With them you can do nothing. They have typhus and dysentery. That is all. They either die or recover. I have no drugs to treat them with. Not even food. You see, I am useless. So why not make me prisoner?" he entreated again. "Perhaps"—his eyes lingered ravishingly on Jim—"perhaps this officer here is a combatant, no?"

Martock spoke with a hardened voice. "You had better stay at your post," he said, "till you're ordered to leave it. In the meantime I'll report what you've told me about your hospital and see if it's possible to send you drugs and supplies."

"You condemn me to certain death," the little man wailed. "My heart is very weak. I am a sufferer from myocarditis and fatty degeneration. This is murder!" He clutched Martock's sleeve tightly as they moved away. Then, realizing that his plea had failed, his features swollen, his cheeks reddened with anger, he pulled himself up to his meagre height and spat at them. "You English swine, you damned beefs!" he squealed.

Martock smiled as they rode on their way. "It seems to me," he said in his dry, level voice, "that my blood-brother's final gesture was a thought unprofessional. Three hundred cases of typhus and dysentery," he went on musingly. "That means for certain that the water of this place is infected. Typhus, of course, is his word for enteric. It was a pretty idea to leave the infection behind. If we have to treat German sick as well as our own . . ." He closed his jaw with a decisive snap. "May I remind you, Redlake," he said, "of a little talk we had one morning at Buiko? I don't like to say 'I told you so'; but this business is only beginning."

"Well, I can get back to my unit anyway," Jim said. "You'll have one off your hands."

"We'll see about that to-morrow," Martock told him. "Don't shout till you're out of the wood."

V. *Five Degrees South*

THAT evening, though pledged to return to the ambulance for the night, Jim managed to snaffle Martock's mule and ride over to the hillside opposite the fort of Handeni, where the Kalaharis were encamped. His heart leapt with pleasure and pride, it was filled with a curious sense of friendliness and security, when the familiar brown-striped flashes on their helmets proclaimed his own regiment's lines. He passed through the transport-park, where Langford's gaunt-ribbed oxen lay happily ruminating at last among heaps of mealie-straw. Their mild eyes had lost the empty, haunted look which Jim had seen in them as they floundered knee-deep in the sand-drifts beside the Pangani.

He made his way straight to the Headquarters tent, where Essex, as spick and span as if he had just emerged from a tailor's in Savile Row, greeted him with a smile and Carlow gave him a gruff "hello" of welcome.

"Well, you haven't missed much," the colonel told him. "We've been stuck in reserve. Beves and the South Africans have had a sharp little brush at Pongwe; we heard their firing last night. You'd better hurry up and get fit though, if you want to join us. I've just had a warning from Brigade that Smuts is moving again—on the strength of our two days on full rations, I imagine," he added with a laugh. "As a matter of fact, if you don't hurry up," he said, "you'll probably find there won't be any regiment left for you to join and your job'll be gone!"

As he spoke, the M.O., who had superseded Martock and discarded Jim four days before, came stalking toward them with sombre eyes.

"Well, doctor, how goes it?" Essex enquired, in a tone of faint mockery. "Here's Redlake rolled up."

The M.O. scowled at Jim. "So I see," he said grimly. "He's no business to be gadding about so soon after a sharp go of dysentery like that." He turned to the colonel: "I've just seen the A.D.M.S., sir. Ten per cent of the division gone sick in the last twelve hours! What d'you make of that?"

"Not so bad," Essex answered cheerfully. "Supposing we go on at that rate the division will last exactly eight days and eight hours. Smuts can do quite a lot with us in that time if only he's quick about it."

"The division isn't a division," the doctor grumbled. "More like a brigade—little more than half the strength when we left Taveta."

"Yes, of course. We're at war," said Essex blandly. "What about a sundowner, Carlow?"

Carlow lumbered away and produced a bottle of whisky and a sparklet syphon.

"Has that water been boiled?" the doctor snapped.

"I hope not," said Essex. "It spoils the taste of it." He smiled at the doctor. They two were old friends; they had seen campaigning together in the Boer War, and a certain impishness, that accorded well with his habitual personal elegance and unquestionable gallantry, made him find delight in pulling his sombre companion's leg.

"The water here is stiff with typhoid and dysentery," the doctor protested.

"The lion drinks it, the hippo drinks it, the eland thrives on it. Why shouldn't I? It has plenty of body and just a suspicion of bouquet. Your very good health, doctor!" said Essex, raising his glass.

"Don't worry about *my* health, sir. You look after your own," the doctor growled indignantly.

"Have one, doc?" said Carlow, smiling. "The water's been boiled all right."

With the mild exhilaration of the drink already colouring his mind, Jim left them and went in search of Macdiarmid and his own section. He found Macdiarmid gorging himself in state on a luxurious dish of bully-beef stewed with broken biscuit and surrounded by boiled green pawpaws, which he generously invited Jim to share.

"It's a grand opportunity," he said, "and ye'd best not let it go by. It may be another month before you get a bellyful like this. Ay, we've missed you, Redlake," he said, "and I'll be glad to have you back again if it's only for company; but, to tell you the truth, we're nothing to boast of just now. We're fading away, right and left, like the flowers of the forest." He shook his grizzled head sadly, and added a mouthful of neat whisky to his stew. "If we go on at this rate," he said, "I foresee we'll be handing in our machine-guns to ordnance within a fortnight."

"The Colonel gives the division exactly eight days and eight hours," Jim said with a laugh.

"Well, I'm no mathematician myself," said Macdiarmid, giving the figures his solemn attention, "but maybe he's right." He shook his head, slowly masticating the while. "We're just like a river, Redlake," he said, "a river that's losing itself in the sand."

That figure remained with Jim, haunting his imagination as he walked Martock's mule back to the fort. A river, losing itself in sand! The melancholy image was appropriate. It was reinforced when, approaching the ambulance lines through a long mango avenue bordered by barrack buildings which had lately been occupied by the Germans' native troops, he saw the rising skeletons of a series of *bandas* that were being "run up" by the porters of the newly arrived Casualty Clearing Station, whose absence Martock had deplored. Two black-tabbed officers of the Indian Medical Service and a small group of *babus* superintended the work; and around them, patiently waiting for the moment when a grass roof might be ready to cover their heads, sprawled, squatted and drooped an enormous concourse of sick and wounded Indians who had been shot out wholesale from the ambulances and regimental sick-quarters to relieve the growing congestion.

This unit's arrival had been the signal for a general clearance to an extent that would surely overflow the new buildings' capacity long before they were roofed. It would have been hard, Jim thought, to imagine any sight less suggestive of a victorious army than this expectant crowd. Its members were drawn from every Indian race and latitude from the Himalayas to Madras: tall, saturnine Pathans of the Seventeenth Cavalry; small, stocky Ghurkas; Mountain Battery Sikhs, with their fierce, curled beards; black-faced Pioneers, with everywhere a sprinkling of the Punjabi Mussulman; yet all of them (save, perhaps, the Ghurkas) whatever the pride or humility of their race, however dark or walnut-coloured their complexion, wore the same air of utter resignation and spiritual defeat. They gave a sense of awful detachment from the busy building activities designed for their comfort. They had no more interest in life. Their souls were as sick as their bodies. And what interest should they have, after all? Jim thought, as his mule picked its way between their languid bodies—these peasants, plucked out of the heart of their own far continent and flung into this; their stomachs starved of the generous rations which, perhaps, had tempted them to enlist; their feet torn and bruised with forced marching, or ragged and festering with sores left by the burrowing jiggers; their spleens swollen and tense with malaria, their blood thinned of its pigment by fever?

These men could not find any heartening consolation in high-sounding phrases or grandiose patriotic abstractions. It mattered nothing to them whether this detestable country, the scene of their exile and purgatory, were ruled by German or British. They were merely mercenaries, doing the work they were paid for. They knew nothing about war-guilt, war-origins, war-aims. They only knew that they were hungry and tired and ill and thousands of miles away from the villages of Hind. So they wrapped their grey blankets around them and watched, with pale, lack-lustre eyes, the jolly African porters who laughed like schoolboys, hacking poles with their *pangas* and grinning down at them like apes from the gabled grass thatch.

"When I looked at those eyes," Jim told Martock, "I seemed to see in them all the inertia of Asia."

Martock nodded. "I know," he said. "Yet look what they've done. If we have to supply the initiative—as, of course, we do—these Indians have shown the most amazing endurance. Our officers may be fools when it comes to fighting; but they do inspire loyalty. The Indian's a splendid fellow until he's sick; but there's nothing so sick in the world as a sick Indian. You can make a note of that as a copy-book maxim. How are *you*, by the way?"

"Oh, *I'm* quite all right," Jim told him. "The C.O.'s been warned by Brigade that the Kalaharis are likely to move to-morrow. I suppose I can join them?"

"We'll see when the time comes," said Martock. "I'm taking no risks."

It was as well that he didn't. In the middle of that night Jim woke to find himself shivering in every limb.

"A hundred and four point three," said Martock when he had taken his temperature. "It's lucky I didn't let you go on. Malaria's no joke on trek."

So this is malaria, Jim thought. "Has the regiment moved?" he asked Martock.

"Another flying column pushed off at dawn. Didn't you hear the racket of Willoughby's Armoured Cars? Their exhausts sound just like machine guns. I shall have to leave you, by the way," Martock said. "A British Casualty Clearing Station is coming through at last—two officers rolled up this morning—and my ambulance will move on. In the meantime I've rigged up a sort of officers' ward inside the gaol. You'll find it much cooler than canvas when the sun is up, and warmer at night."

For the moment the matter of heat and cold in Jim's case had no relation to external conditions, being controlled from the interior of his brain, where the poisoned heat-centre plunged his body into fierce alternations of fire and ice, each in turn so devastating that he hardly knew what happened in the intervals between them. For long hours his mind was tossed on an uneasy sea of dreams which subsided, at last, into a hallucinated calm in which, it seemed, he was back again at Thorpe Folville, in the small white-walled bedroom with the African sampler, listening, in the blessed state betwixt sleep and waking, to the familiar chirruping of house-martins in the eaves. Indeed, he had completely forgotten the departing Martock's last words when he woke, reluctantly, to find them mysteriously confirmed. He was lying, apparently, on a veritable horsehair mattress. As he opened his eyes they stared upward at the high ceiling of a white-washed chamber that had once been a prison-cell in the German gaol. The dawn of which he had been dreaming illuminated this cell with shafts of mild light proceeding from arrow-slit windows through which, from time to time, red-backed, red-headed swallows fluttered in and out with a liquid twittering, bringing food to their solemn-faced fledgelings whose bright eyes peered out from mud nests, set like a frieze at the junction of wall and ceiling. For a while, in dreamy abstraction, he continued to watch them, for half of his consciousness had not yet returned from Thorpe Folville, till, suddenly wide awake, his eyes caught a charcoal scrawl: *Gott strafe England!* and he turned his head to see that the occupant of the mattress next to his was none other than Furnival.

"Hello," he said lazily, "what the devil are *you* doing here?"

Furnival laughed. "Just the same as you, I guess. Thank God you're awake. You snore like a pig, Redlake. Feeling better?"

"I think I'm all right."

He was astonished to discover that ever since Martock had picked him up in the bush he and Furnival had been travelling together in adjoining waggons.

"You see, I was too bad," Furnival explained, "to be sent back along the line in an open lorry. This malaria's the devil. Just when you think you're all clear it comes back again. The attacks are as regular as clockwork, every three days. Still, I've broken the run this time, so I hope the damned thing is finished. I hear that the regiment's gone on."

An hour or so later a misshapen gnarled Scotsman of the Lowland Divisional Clearing Station brought them in a breakfast of mouldy bread, rancid rashers of bacon, and milk—fresh milk!—that tasted of the smoke of the gourd. They ate it all ravenously. To them such food was ambrosia.

"It's a treat," Furnival said, "after nothing but biltong and biscuit or hunks of fly-stricken trek-ox, to taste civilized food. I felt half-stifled at first to sleep with a roof over my head."

The roof did not shelter them for long. That very evening Handeni was swamped by an influx of South African wounded from the major engagement whose coming Martock had feared. Beves's Brigade, which, all down the Pangani, had acted as Divisional Reserve, had caught it hot at a place called Kangata, where the road to Morogoro dipped to a slender stream. It was the usual story: blind fighting in the bush at dusk; a column, compelled by the thickness of the thorn to march in close formation, swept of a sudden by ranged maxims firing into the brown. Jim and Furnival heard its details from Malan, the Boer officer of the Fifth South African Infantry who had shared their table aboard the *Armadale*—or rather from the ghost of Malan, an emaciated, bearded scarecrow with wild eyes and a blood-caked sleeve suspended in a sling of khaki torn from a dead German's tunic. He lay on his belly in the courtyard of the gaol and scratched a map with his blood-black finger-nail in the sand.

"We were moving up here," he explained, "by an abandoned road—the *fuss-weg* they call it—parallel with the main road—the *auto-weg*—by which the Germans expected us. That didn't suit their book at all; they'd prepared their position, with maxim and gun emplacements, right across the main road. So the beggars threw out a patrol to draw our fire—which they did: we followed them up as fast as we could while they retreated. Right up to the very spot that they had prepared for us. Then, of course, they let fly! If we'd had the sense to retire it 'ld have been all right. But we didn't; our chaps are like that. They hung on in the same old place till we'd lost the best part of a hundred men manning one machine-gun. The road's stiff with ambulances and transport carts bringing wounded back. God knows where we're going to put 'em!"

God indeed knew! It was clear that the small advance party of the Clearing Station didn't: a detachment of two medical officers and four white orderlies, with rations barely enough for themselves, but neither dressings nor medical stores! They did what they could, with the help of the Indian Clearing Station already established, to turn the Handeni gaol into something resembling a hospital; sent out foraging parties to bring in loot of beds and linen or anything else that might serve from abandoned farms in the district; propped up shattered legs with silk cushions from German drawing-rooms, stripped sheets and bed-spreads for bandages, padded splints with the wool from pillows and bolsters, turned flowered toilet basins and jugs into receptacles for perchloride.

Jim and Furnival took their turn with the rest of the convalescents in these improvisations. The drawing-room of the German Post-Commandant became a theatre through which, in an endless stream, the loaded stretchers passed. Jim saw them waiting their turn, those wretched fragments of mangled humanity, ten deep in the relative shade of the *stoep* over which a flamboyant *bougainvillaeia* trailed its magenta bloom. The drawing-room inside was like a shambles; its floor littered, perforce, with foul, soaked dressings amid which red ants, emerging from cracks in the flagged pavement, swarmed, scavenging heaven knew what unimaginable delicacy. Each one of these victims of Kangata, however grave their wounds, had outlived the purgatory of forty miles' cruel jolting over a track reflecting the fierce heat of the tropical sun, without food, without water, without shade, without any succour beyond the hasty surgery of an advanced dressing-station. They were unlike any wounded that Jim had seen before; they had passed beyond the stage of complaint—

perhaps even beyond sensation. The eyes that stared out of their cavernous orbits had a bloodless, far-away look, as though the brains behind them were too numbed and hopeless to know or care what they saw. Here, at least, the grinding fragments of broken bones were free from the torture of movement. Little more, alas, could be said for it.

"We can't feed the poor devils properly," the Scotch surgeon complained. "It's heart-breaking to see supply-lorries go through and not dare to touch 'em without authority. And now the water's running short in the dam. We've barely enough to drink, let alone wash our patients. And as for dressings—we shall soon be using our shirts!"

The looted linen and cotton had given out before the rest of the Clearing Station struggled through from the railway with the tents and stores and supplies of their full equipment. But by then a large number of the Kangata wounded had no further need for them.

And the Medical Headquarters controlling lines of communication were still comfortably established, as Martock had said, in Nairobi, a cool and delightful hill-station six thousand feet above sea-level, and roughly, five hundred miles behind the starved, sun-tortured front. Jim brooded on Martock's words. He had no reason to believe that the men in Nairobi slept any the worse for Kangata, or failed to enjoy a good appetite.

He was far too busy, to tell the truth, to indulge in any prolonged bitterness. Every man, well or sick, at Handeni had to lend a hand in his emergency. For three days on end the casualties kept straggling in on every conceivable kind of wheeled vehicle, to be followed by pitiful strings of walking-wounded who had trudged back over forty miles of road as best they could. It was on the evening of the fourth day after Kangata, when Jim, now convalescent, was sitting with Furnival in the shade of a fruitless mango outside the fort, that the last of those sad little groups of walking-wounded arrived. Their leader, a lanky, bearded subaltern in a crumpled helmet, shorts torn to rags, and a blood-stained khaki shirt with one empty sleeve, lurched up and stood for one moment speechless before them. Then, moistening his cracked lips, he spoke, begging for water—not for himself but for one of his companions who limped forward painfully, clinging to the arm of another. Furnival jumped up at once with his water-bottle, while Jim and the subaltern stood staring at each other with undefined recognition. The young man was a stranger to Jim, yet he knew those wide-set eyes. Whoever . . .? The South African spoke first.

"Good God! It's Jim Redlake!" His blackened lips were parted in a ghastly smile.

"Mark! My dear old chap! I've been looking for you for months!"

"Well, here I am . . . all that's left of me!" Mark Malthus replied. "I've been looking for you as well. Catherine wrote and told me you were somewhere about."

"For God's sake don't stand! You've been hit?"

"Yes. Smashed up my elbow. I must hand over my lot to the hospital, wherever it is. We've had a hell of a trek. Four days on the road. Come along, you chaps! Last lap!"

They dragged on in silence to the battlemented gate of the fort, Jim and Furnival supporting the man to whom they had given water. In the middle of the courtyard Mark Malthus himself went down like a shot partridge. His wound, in fact, was far more serious than any of the others: the left elbow-joint blown to pieces by a lead slug from an Askari's rifle. Jim and Furnival between them carried him straight to the theatre where the gnarled Scotch orderly stripped the matted compost of field-dressings and shredded khaki from the gangrened limb.

The surgeon scowled at the wound. "Amputation," he said.

"Can't you save it?" Jim whispered. "This fellow's an old friend of mine."

"Three days too late," said the surgeon. "I'm not at all sure it oughtn't to come off at the shoulder. However, we'll have a first shot at it through the upper arm. No time to be lost, though. I shall want the orderly to assist me. If you don't mind, Redlake, you might give me a hand with the chloroform."

He went over to Mark, who had barely recovered consciousness, with a reassuring smile. "Well, you've made a nice mess of that elbow, young man," he said. "I shall save your arm if I can, though I make no promises. You won't feel it. Your friend Redlake, here, will give you a whiff of something."

"Don't you think you'd better get on with the other chaps first?" Mark Malthus stammered.

"Don't you worry yourself. Someone else'll look after them."

He handed a mask of chloroform-sprinkled lint to Jim. "Now all that you've got to do," he told Malthus, patting his shoulder, "is to breathe in deeply and naturally. I'll see that Redlake shan't suffocate you."

"All right," Mark whispered.

"Give him plenty of air, Redlake."

Jim sat at the head of the improvised operating-table. He had given so many anæsthetics during the last three days without any fatality, on the slender qualification of his broken studies at St. Luke's, that the proceeding no longer filled him with its first terror. He could see nothing, mercifully, of what the surgeon was doing, for the orderly's white overall, a Swahili's robe commandeered, obstructed his view. As he sat there, mildly intoxicated by the chloroform fumes, listening to the stertorous breaths distending the laxity of Mark's suffused, discoloured cheeks, he was seized once more with the anger he had felt by the sight of his comrade's dead body in the fight by the railway.

Through Mark, once again, the war became personal to him. His brain burned with positive hatred for the Germans who had mutilated this boy, his friend, Catherine's brother, who, only a few moments before, had given such proof of his chivalrous gallantry by asking the surgeon to attend to the others first. Those eyes, this mangled flesh, were of the same tissue as Catherine's. Tears came to his own smarting eyes, a black mist of revengeful fury darkened his mind, as he thought—not of Mark lying helpless there on the table, but of the Mark he remembered in far off days at Cold Orton. And with these thoughts there came into that furnace-hot abandoned German drawing-room in the black, lost, uttermost darkness of savage Africa, a vision of schoolroom tea at Cold Orton Vicarage: the thick slabs of bread and butter, the home-made jam; the beautiful, innocent naturalness of their trivial talk; that atmosphere of sweetness and light and essential goodness (there was no other word) which emanated like the cool perfume of spring flowers from the Malthus family.

The contrast of these memories with his present state made him yearn more passionately than ever for Catherine's presence. She had written to Mark and told him that Jim was in German East. Had she told Mark anything of their enchanted week in Durban, or was that sweet secret too rare to be trusted to paper? Yes, Mark had heard from her, yet Jim himself, so far, had had no answer to the letter he had written on board the *Armadale*. It was more than six weeks since any mails had reached the Kalaharis. They had to give way to the prime necessaries of warfare, ammunition and food. Yet weren't mails almost as important: the spiritual food on which the mind of exiles subsisted? The force's postal arrangements were in the hands of Indians. Once again the mark of the *babu's* indolent incompetence! She must have answered that letter! his mind insisted.

"That'll do. He won't need any more. His pulse isn't too good. The poor beggar hasn't any too much blood to lose." Jim heard the surgeon's tired voice addressing the orderly. "Keep a watch on that pulse, Black. If he shows any signs of collapse we may have to do a transfusion. He's suffered a good deal of shock."

"Transfusion?" Jim caught at the word. "I say, if he wants any blood, he'd better have some of mine."

"Complete with malarial crescents?" the surgeon laughed. "No thank you, Redlake. You don't look any too bright yourself. Have you another attack coming on? Here . . . what the devil are you doing?"

He caught at Jim's arm and steadied him, then lowered him gently to the foully littered floor. In spite of himself Jim had fainted. At that moment he had just caught sight of Mark Malthus's severed arm.

Returning to consciousness a few moments later he saw that Mark's body had been carried away. The surgeon and his colleagues were busy at another table, leaving him, apparently, forgotten where he had fallen. As he rose to his feet, somewhat ashamed of himself, they gave him no more sign of recognition than a friendly nod. He found Furnival smoking a pipe of black native tobacco under the mango-tree.

"Funny, running into a chap you knew like that," Furnival said. "Who is he?"

"The brother of the girl we saw in the restaurant at Durban," Jim told him.

"Oh, *that's* it, is it? No wonder you split yourself over him. It seems wrong that a young chap like that should lose an arm just for lack of decent attention. D'you know, Redlake, it strikes me that the medical arrangements aren't what they might be."

"What they *might* be?" Jim pouted out the phials of his anger on the subject in which Martock had coached him so thoroughly. Furnival stared at him in breathless amazement.

"I say, if you go talking like that, young man, you'll find yourself under arrest. Discouraging His Majesty's forces!"

"If Mark Malthus goes west," Jim answered hotly, "I shall say a damned sight more."

But Mark Malthus didn't go west. That pure-blooded stock, hardened by the healthy rigours of Cold Orton, had strong powers of resistance. The wound of his amputation healed by first intention. Within three days he was sitting up and talking to Jim, in one of the improvised wards of the Handeni fort, on a mattress placed between those of two German prisoners who listened to all that they said with a kind of stolid curiosity. Very childish their talk must have seemed to Ober-leutnant Zahn, lying there with his splintered thigh in a makeshift cradle of galvanized roof-iron. A hard case was Herr Zahn, fiercely loathed by his own command, as Jim knew by the extracts from German diaries that Intelligence printed. One diarist, he remembered, had gleefully watched the naval bombardment of Tanga—"For Zahn is there, the swine; and I only hope he'll stop a twelve-inch shell!" There wasn't much blood and iron about poor Zahn now that the "Beefs" had got him. He listened to Jim and Mark Malthus talking with a scornful smile on his brutally stupid face. It was ludicrous to think that an army composed of such irresponsible children as these should have conquered a third of German East in a month. Their deplorable lack of seriousness appalled him, as his eyes, full of hatred, suggested to his neighbour Taube, a poor, frightened civilian, lying there with the anxious features of a man with an abdominal wound.

As for Jim and Mark, there seemed to be no end to their talk. The South Africans' mails had been handled more carefully than those of Sheppard's brigade, and Mark was well primed with the latest Thorpe Folville news. Jim learned, for instance, that the Castle had at length been turned into an auxiliary hospital, with Lady Essendine herself as commandant. Mrs. Jewell's talent for managing other people's business and asserting her own code of morals had found scope in the duties of quartermaster of the new hospital, in the performance of which she did her best to starve the officer patients (on the theory that it was a mistake to make them too comfortable away from the front) and to protect the nurses from "losing their heads" over them. Lady Cynthia Hinton was there, assisting her mother, looking much older, Mrs. Malthus said, and improved out of all recognition.

"A great friend of yours, wasn't she?" Mark asked slyly.

"Yes, I saw a good deal of her. She was amazingly pretty," Jim said, "in her own way."

"Not so pretty as your cousin Lucy, really," Mark agreed. "Too hard for me. I suppose you know that Holly has gone to Egypt? He's a regular Crusader, mother says, looking forward to occupying Jerusalem. They see a lot of Lucy at Cold Orton. She's expecting a baby. Imagine it!"

Jim asked about Margaret. Her husband, Mark told him, had been attached as Judge Advocate to the Northern Command, on the strength of his legal knowledge, and Margaret was living at Ripon in lodgings of some kind. Mark's news of Jim's grandmother struck him as rather sinister. The practice had been sold, he said, to an elderly practitioner—a great change from our dear old doctor, Mrs. Malthus wrote—and Mrs. Weston, abandoning The Grange and storing the bulk of her furniture with Margaret and Lucy, had retired, with the marmoset, to a cottage that belonged to her on the Rossington Road. She had begun, Mrs. Malthus thought, to look terribly shrivelled and old. The doctor's death had changed her whole disposition; her acid manners offended everybody; it seemed that she couldn't talk about anything but money and the ingratitude of everyone connected with her, Aunt Margaret always excepted. "Your father," Mrs. Malthus had written to Mark, "has tried his best to be friendly with her for the doctor's sake, but her rudeness is so pointed as to make that almost impossible."

All the time, Mark persisted in harking back to High Leicestershire. In spite of his years in Natal, he evidently still regarded Cold Orton as his home, which seemed strange to Jim, who had never really had one to call his own. What he wanted, of course, was that Mark should talk about Catherine; but Mark, a mere brother, seemed to take his sister for granted. She wrote to him regularly of course, and posted him parcels of food that never arrived; but Mark on the whole, seemed ridiculously unappreciative of this honour for which Jim would have given his soul.

"Did she tell you much about our meeting in Durban?" Jim asked anxiously.

"I forget. I don't think so. There wasn't anything to write about except that she'd met you."

Jim smiled to himself. Oh, *wasn't* there! Perhaps, after all, her secretiveness concealed the depth of her feelings.

"You see," Mark went on, "Catherine's perfectly happy there. South African life appeals much more to her than to me. I've always got my eye on England; but Natal fits her like a glove. She has tons of friends, to begin with, who are always inviting her out to parties and dances and so on. Men like her, you know. There's a fellow named Taylor . . ."

"I met him. A middle-aged man."

"Not so much of your middle-aged! Women don't mind that. And he's dead nuts on Catherine. Everybody in Durban thinks they'll make a match of it."

"Do you?" Jim asked anxiously.

"I don't know. I like Taylor myself, and he's very well off. Catherine hinted, in her last letter, that he'd proposed again."

"And she turned him down?"

"I suppose so. She'd have told me if she'd accepted him."

Jim left Mark that evening in a state of acutest misery. He went fuming alone up and down the dark mango avenue, cursing the field post-office from the bottom of his heart, deploring the damnable luck that had deprived him of the chance of a last interview with Catherine. Supposing that the hot letter which he had written aboard the *Armadale* had miscarried? In that case there was no end to the misunderstandings that might have arisen. However she felt about it, she surely could not leave it unanswered if she had received it. Her letters to Mark had been left behind among his abandoned kit at Kangata; there was no way, now, by which he could find the date on which the last of them, with its news of Taylor's persistence, had been written; and enquiries too pressing might arouse Mark's suspicions. Why not? For the best of reasons: Jim was still too sore from the humiliation he had suffered at Cynthia's hands to court another. Perhaps, after all, Catherine had written to him. Her letter, with any others that had come through, would doubtless be waiting for him in Langford's charge with the Kalaharis—which was another reason, if any were needed, for hastening his return to the front. Even if no letter awaited him, the tension of life with a regiment in touch with the enemy would engross him. Anything was better than this aimless, indefinite existence on L. of C., which combined the discomforts of tropical warfare with none of its excitements.

The Officer Commanding the Clearing Station, a comfortable Scotch territorial, was quite pleased to be rid of him; he was only now beginning to emerge from the unexpected confusion into which Kangata had thrown him; another scrap was expected at any moment, and empty beds were precious. He gave Jim and Furnival a stock of quinine for the journey, and discharged them gladly. Under the grudging eyes of Ober-leutnant Zahn, Jim said good-bye to Mark Malthus.

"I suppose you'll be seeing Catherine in a month or six weeks," he said. "Don't forget to give her my love, and ask her to write to me if she's nothing better to do."

It seemed almost unfair to poor, maimed Mark to charge him with so momentous a message in a tone of such lightness. Mark waved him a wan good-bye with his remaining arm. That evening Jim and Furnival reached the scene of the fight at Kangata, the open woodland which Malan had described, scattered with tree-trunks felled for the German gun-emplacements and other standing trees whose bark, stripped by that fury of flying bullets, still oozed a viscous sap of the colour of blood. The ground of the bush was littered everywhere with empty cartridge-cases, stained scraps of field-dressings, bullet-pierced helmets, shreds of khaki. An area of newly-dug earth, stamped down, concealed the South African dead. By the side of it, transport-drivers had delved another deep pit in hopes of finding water for their mules. In vain, Jim supposed, for the air of that deadly spot was saturated with the foul odour of rotting horseflesh. On a low, dependent thorn-tree he saw a haversack slung. He turned it out eagerly, much to Furnival's amusement. It might have been Mark's and have contained Catherine's letters. It didn't. . . .

That night they slept under a tarpaulin that had been slung from a wrecked Napier lorry by its driver, a phlegmatic Canadian, who sat guarding the stores it contained until they could be transferred to another. The man was eager to talk after three days of solitude.

"From what people say," he grumbled, "you'd think that an M.T. driver's job was a cushy one. Well, it isn't so bad in France—but in this blasted country . . .! The only relief you get is when you've the luck to smash your axle or buckle a wheel on a tree-stump or get blown up by a land-mine. And when you're landed like this it's not much better. There's always the chance of a German patrol popping out and mopping you up. Why, right back of Buiko, ten days ago, my mate got six bullets in his chest sitting right beside me. Supposing it had been me, and I'd had to let go of the wheel, the whole bloody caboosh would have crashed down into the river. I'll say I drove her like hell that evening! Some ride! But here she is, poor old bus! They'll all come to it sooner or later. Have either of you got such a thing as a fill of tobacco?"

What he obviously wanted more was a dose of quinine. Jim gave him both. At sunset a violent rigor of malaria seized him. He lay shivering and sweating under his tarpaulin while Jim and Furnival heaped branches of thorn together, building a boma to keep out the lions.

"Last night," the driver said, between his chattering teeth, "the brutes were sniffing all round. It's the dead mules and bullocks and the niggers the Germanis left in the bush that attract them. God knows they've queer tastes! The stink of dead cattle round here is enough to sicken you. They say that a fire keeps the lions off. I hope that it will. It's no damned use shooting a lion with a service rifle. A nickel cased .303 bullet goes through them, and when they're wounded they're devils."

In spite of his fever he fell like a famished dog on the rations which Jim and Furnival shared with him. The fact that his stomach refused to retain them made no difference. "It's a bit of a trial," he modestly said, "to sit here day after day with an empty belly by the side of a bloody lorry that's loaded with biscuits and bully-beef. There's times when you feel like saying 'To hell with court-martials' and cracking a case; but I guess if we all did that the chaps at the front wouldn't thank us!"

His itch for talking kept them awake far into the night. Hour after hour he went on, in a monotonous, nasal sing-song, talking of Canada and the city of Winnipeg, near which he had been born—its great golden wheatfields, its wintry coverlet of snow—till his voice died away in the darkness and no sound remained but the crackle of brushwood catching fire, the soft settling of embers, and that endless, subdued restlessness that passes for silence in the tropical night.

Next morning at dawn they left him, high-flushed with fever, promising to give news of the stranded lorry to anyone they met on the road. Jim and Furnival split their joint store of quinine and tobacco and left him half of it, after having filled a canvas *chagghal* with water from the remains of the stream. Polluted as it was with dead beasts and unburied Germans, it was the best they could do for him. Yet the effluvium that hung like a fog about the wood at Kangata was nothing compared with that of the German camp on the far side of the valley; for the enemy, following their usual custom, had made their askaris foul it systematically before they retreated in a hurry that was betrayed by the ashes of a bonfire on which they had emptied petroleum, and the dismal skeleton of a wrecked Ford car.

Through the heat of the day they trudged on over the *auto weg*. Its surface, now worn by the guns and transport of two armies, had crumbled away till it seemed no more than a track of churned sand in the enveloping bush—very lovely here, for the trees of the open forest were shagged with silvery beards of trailing lichen that gave it the faery aspect of a tropical Arden more fit for the staging of delicate fancies than of that grim drama. Yet, even here, a winged death held sway, as Jim knew, not only from the bloated or shrivelled remains of transport-animals that strewed the roadside with increasing frequency, but from the cause of that slaughter—the cross-winged tsetses that kept them company, flickering at their bare knees and arms with a maddening persistence.

"If we get sleeping-sickness, we get it," Jim thought. "And that's that!"

In the afternoon, when they had reached a point some thirty miles south of Handeni, a sound of far firing reached them: the familiar dull boom of the enemy's naval guns, mingled now with the sharper report of some kind of quick-firer that was new to them. In that dry air sound travelled so freakishly that it was impossible to guess how far they might be from the firing; but the certainty that the brigade was in action had the effect of quickening their steps. It was with a sensation of enormous relief that they saw a string of Ford ambulances approaching from the direction of Handeni. In the front of the first, very pale and obviously screwed up to the dreadful occasion, sat one of the elderly medical officers they had known on the *Armadale*, a man named Garth. Round his neck, like an amulet more protective than any red-cross brassard, a binaural stethoscope, negligently suspended, gave a touch of the ridiculous. They hailed him joyfully; the car pulled up; Jim demanded a lift.

Garth shook his head helplessly, and murmured something about the Geneva Convention.

"I don't think I ought to carry you," he said, "unless you're wounded."

"But what earthly difference can it make?"

"Well, you see," said the doctor, "supposing the Germans appeared and found I was carrying two combatant officers up to the line, they'd be perfectly justified in firing on us, wouldn't they?"

Jim laughed. "My dear Garth, they'd certainly fire on you in any case. Do you imagine that German askaris respect the red cross?"

The doctor wagged his head doubtfully. "Two wrongs don't make a right, you know. According to the Geneva Convention . . ." He paused to find adequate words to define the position, when the ragged rifle-fire of some sniping patrol broke out on the left. "There, what did I tell you? You see, they've spotted you!" he cried, with an agonized urgency. "Drive on . . . drive on!"

As the ambulance lurched forward, Jim and Furnival, laughing, clung to the tail of it and pulled themselves inside. It was saturated with antiseptics, but, smell or no smell, the relief to their aching limbs was miraculous. Through the flap at the front the doctor continued to shout protests, punctuated by the ambulance's jolting.

"You fellows, you know. . . . It's all wrong. . . . You've no right . . . . To travel under. . . . The red cross's. . . . Protection. . . . . I shall have to. . . . Report it."

"All right, report it!" Jim shouted back. "You can't stop now."

There was no disputing that. As the car bumped on, their poor friend assuaged his nervousness by alternately removing and replacing his spectacles. When the sporadic rifle-shots had died away behind, he turned to them again and spoke with a nervous smile:

"You'll excuse me, Redlake," he said, "if my manner was a little hasty. You see, as a matter of fact, this is the first time I've been under fire. For me it's a novel and rather disturbing experience. Not so bad as I thought though," he added with an apologetic laugh. "When it's over . . ."

It wasn't over. Even as he spoke, with a remote, aerial whimper a shell whistled over them to burst in the road three hundred yards behind, where a cloud of mingled red dust and black smoke hurtled into the air like the spoutings of a volcano.

"What was that?" Garth asked, in a spirit of pure, scientific enquiry.

"High explosive. Four-point-ones. They're shelling the road. You can't say that's our fault anyway!" Jim reminded him.

"How very interesting," said the doctor. "So *that's* high explosive! Well, well . . ."

They pulled up suddenly in the immediate rear of a battery of South African Field Artillery, unlimbered, waiting to fire. Jim and Furnival tumbled out of the ambulance. Jim bombarded a gunner whom he knew with hurried questions.

"No damned good!" said the gunner. "The bush is too thick. We can't find a target. Artillery's no use in this blasted country." The Kalaharis, he thought, with the rest of Sheppard's brigade, were waiting to make a frontal attack on the bridge-head of the Lukigura river where Kraut was standing, while Hoskins, the Divisional Commander, had pushed off into the blue with the idea of crossing the stream higher up and enveloping the enemy's rear. What had happened, God only knew. How *could* one know? He ended with a vivid, if highly-coloured description of German East Africa.

Jim and Furnival moved on at once in the direction of the river. They struck the wire of a field telephone that led them through a black-soiled jungle of wild sisal and raffia-palms, fording channels of ooze from which their floundering released bubbles of marsh-gas. The fatigue of their forty-mile trek had left them in no condition for this sort of struggle. Suddenly they realized that they had lost their clue of wire. Their sense of direction failed them. In a growth of such density they might have passed within twenty yards of a whole battalion without being aware of it. At last they reached a mud-channel wider and deeper than all the rest. They forded it, sunk in the black ooze up to their thighs. As they scrambled up the further bank the sound of a human voice startled them. Jim whipped out his revolver instinctively.

"I surrender," was what the voice said.

Propped up against a trunk of acacia, his hands uplifted, a studious-looking German was sitting, with an open book on his knees. He was wearing high-powered spectacles, like Mr. Malthus's, from behind which his pale-blue, watery eyes were magnified to an expression of extreme surprise. He was not a whit more startled, however, than Jim at that moment.

"I surrender," he repeated in excellent English. "I am your prisoner."

"All right," said Jim. There was nothing else to be said. "You'd better get up."

"My book . . ." said the German.

Jim picked it up; it was Heine's Italian *Reisebilder*.

"How the devil did you get here, behind our lines?" Furnival asked. He spoke as a constable might have spoken to a burglar caught red-handed.

The prisoner shrugged his shoulders. "That I can't tell you. I have lost my way." He turned to Jim with a disarming smile: "May I put my hands down?" he asked politely.

"Turn his pockets out, Redlake," Furnival suspiciously suggested.

Jim did so, disgorging a bottle of quinine tablets, an automatic, a twist of native tobacco, a clasp-knife, a section of sausage, and a wallet of dirty photographs, including one of its owner in full dress standing beside a native woman in none. The last seemed a curious contrast to the volume of Heine.

"I am ready," said the prisoner politely. "Where will you take me?"

Jim and Furnival stared at each other. The situation was so fantastic that they burst out laughing. The prisoner seemed puzzled by this queer example of British psychology.

"I'm damned if I know," Jim admitted. "We're as lost as you are."

"Better go on the same tack," said Furnival. "We're bound to get somewhere. You move on in front, Redlake, and I'll follow. This blighter can walk between us."

They set off. "But that," the German reminded them anxiously, "is the direction of the firing line!"

"Come along," said Jim sternly.

As he did so their prisoner explained what had happened to him. He wasn't, it appeared, so lost as he had led them to believe. Sent out with a native patrol of snipers to harass the transport, he had suddenly found himself within a few yards of the advancing Kalaharis. The askaris of his patrol had melted away in the bush. "And I alone," he continued, "being tired and not wishing to be shot, kept my head, as you say, and decided to go to sleep. You English are sportsmen: you do not shoot the sleeping bird . . . no? So now I am your prisoner," he panted with intense satisfaction, as though the relationship was particularly tender and intimate. "It is the fortune of war and I am very glad. In any case my scientific temperament makes me unfitted for warfare. I am a philologist, a laureate of Dresden. A Saxon, like yourselves. I study the Bantu dialects on the Masai plateau. Would you mind going rather slower? My breath is short."

A few moments later they stumbled on one of the Kalaharis' outposts. The sergeant in charge stared at them as if they were ghosts.

"Hello, sir, where have you blown in from, and what have you got there?" he said.

"A prisoner," said Jim. "You'd better take charge of him."

"Better shoot the swine," a gaunt Kalahari grumbled.

"We'll keep this one for seed, George," another replied in shrill Cockney.

The German nodded his head approvingly. He appreciated the joke.

"Where's the main body, sergeant?" Jim asked.

"Over here on the left, sir."

They came on the elder Engelbrecht, looking bored and almost too grumpy to welcome them. The attack on the bridge-head, he said, had met with considerable resistance. Once more, it appeared, the enveloping movement had failed. The enemy had simply melted away through the bush like smoke. The bridge was intact. They were merely stuck there waiting for orders to cross the river.

"Any mails come up yet?" Jim asked the question that was uppermost in his mind.

"Mails?" Engelbrecht echoed blankly. "Of course they haven't. Nor females either," he added despondently.

That evening the whole brigade crossed the Lukigura, marching into a perimeter camp pitched under the loom of the mountain called Kanga. The place was M'siha—a spot of evil omen. They dug themselves in as best they might in that stoney ground. All night the enemy's naval guns kept up a sulky bombardment, lobbing high explosive into the lines like a lazy boy pitching pebbles into a pond. The flash of the four-point-ones washed the sky like flickers of summer-lightning, striking sparks from heaped clouds that brooded over the hills in the shape of enormous anvils. Before dawn the firing ceased, and Jim slept like a log.

VI. *The Broken Net*

As they crossed the Lukigura that evening, and dug themselves in beside its tributary the Msiha, Jim had felt, throughout the brigade, a high and confident spirit. It was true that the enemy, for the third time in six weeks, had slipped out of the claws of Smuts' enveloping movement; his force, though sufficiently ponderable in action—as had been shown by his fierce counter-attacks on the bridge-head—had maintained its ghostly elusiveness. It had shed, none the less, a mass of material by no means phantasmal, in the shape of abandoned ammunition and machine-gun equipment with which the bush was scattered. Many prisoners had been taken besides Jim's "sleeping bird," the Saxon philologist. The Lukigura itself, now happily behind them, was the last great natural obstacle but one of the many which had lain between them and the Central Railway, the occupation of which, as strategists agreed, would mean the end of the campaign. They were now only seventy miles away from the railway, which was threatened not only by themselves but by Van Deventer, whose movements must have been freed (providing he were able to move) by von Lettow's withdrawal of the force that had been keeping a watch on him at Kondoa.

Even if the enemy concentration that now confronted them in the Nguru hills was superior to their own in numbers, it was some consolation to know that Smuts' series of turning movements had shepherded the German forces into a single fold, thus clarifying the confusion of so many scattered points of danger and resistance. In place of half-a-dozen enemies they now had one, subjected to the converging pressure of Smuts, who immediately faced him, of Van Deventer on his left flank, of the navy at the coast on his right, of the Belgians moving down the Central Railway in his rear, and further south, incredibly distant as they might be, of the columns of Northey working up from Rhodesia. Whatever his strength might be, von Lettow was cornered. The weather began to pile up for a thunderstorm, the coming of which was foretold by the summer lightning of those gun-flashes in the Nguru hills. How soon the full storm would break nobody could tell—von Lettow himself would have a say in it—but that it must come soon nobody doubted.

Yet that camp at Msiha was destined to become, for Jim, a symbol of all the campaign's endurances and frustrations. They expected to stay there a week at the most, though, with such a thruster as Smuts in command, so long a halt seemed unlikely. They stayed there for six; and each of those weeks was a blacker hell than the one that preceded it.

"I wish someone would gently explain to the staff," said Furnival bitterly, "that they're not still in India. A perimeter camp like this, with rough trenches all round, and hospitals and transport and cavalry lines cooped up in the middle, may be all very well when you're fighting hill-tribes who haven't artillery. The Dutchmen are just as bad. They're used to the same sort of warfare. They can never get out of their minds the idea that a camp should be a *laager* of outspanned waggons. But here we are, sitting down in an open plain, with the ground too hard to dig trenches, right under the eyes of the German gunners' observers! It's a soft job for them. All they have to do is sit tight and spray us with shrapnel and high explosive whenever they feel like doing a bit of shooting. They just can't go wrong—they're bound to hit something—and the people who catch it hottest are the poor devils in hospital and the wretched transport. I don't wonder they're fed to the teeth!"

"It wouldn't be quite so bad," Jim said, "if we could hit back. But we can't. That's the devil of it. Those damned naval guns from the *Königsberg* have it all their own way."

"Well, they'll soon have the Peggy guns down," said Furnival hopefully, "and the navy will have a chance of making up for letting the *Königsberg* escape. They've let in another blockade-runner, by the way. Some of the shell-cases the Punjabis picked up on the Lukigura were marked 1916."

Somewhere amid the sand-drifts of the Pangani, at that moment, the long-nosed battery of the gunboat *Pegasus*—the "Peggy guns" as they called them—were being hauled painfully forward. The rumour of their approach filled the camp with excitement; but when they arrived, they could no more reach the enemy than on the day when the *Pegasus* herself had been sunk at Zanzibar.

Nor was this all. The rising tide of sickness which Martock had prophesied weeks before now began to disintegrate that immobilized force as spring tides break up a stranded ship. Many units—particularly those that had been long in the country, like the Lancs—now shrunken to a mere machine-gun company—the Indians of Sheppard's brigade, and the Kalaharis, could muster no more than a third of their original strength. Day after day the long convoys of motor ambulances evacuated their sick under fire, their broken springs and distorted chasis braving the dangers of road-mines laid in the night, and German patrols that infested the forty mile stretch of what once had been the *auto-weg* to Handeni. Though medical arrangements had improved, the ambulance space available was still inadequate to deal with so much sickness. To cope with its volume, Martock's unit had erected long grass *bandas* in the midst of the perimeter, out of which, as soon as these were erected, they had been shelled to blazes. Jim helped them to transport their patients to a series of dugouts, painfully excavated by the Sixty-first Pioneers on the side of a hill that, the gunners said, would protect them from the enemy's fire. But not a bit of it! On the very day they moved in, the naval guns found them: the Germans had dug pits that gave their four-point-ones an elevation that allowed them to use them as howitzers for high angle fire at their extreme range of more than eleven thousand yards.

Malaria and blackwater had long been commonplaces of life at Msiha, when, all of a sudden, a violent epidemic of dysentery broke out in the improvised hospitals themselves. The grey phantom of Martock brought the news of this to Jim one evening as he sat in a dugout in the new lines to which the destructive fire of the naval guns had finally driven the Kalaharis.

"You expected it, didn't you?" Jim asked.

"Of course. In this country no large body of men can stay in one spot for long without risking something of that kind. The devil of it is, we can't treat the poor beggars."

"You mean that you're short of drugs?"

"Short of drugs!" he repeated bitterly. "You know quite well that we've two kinds of dysentery to deal with. In the field you can't tell which it is, so you treat all cases for both; you give emetin for amœbic and Epsom salts for bacillary dysentery. Well, our emetin gave out a week ago, and we've used the last grain of our salts to-night. The C.O. had a brain-wave. You know—or perhaps you don't know—that emetin comes from ipecacuanha. In the ambulance packs we discovered some bottles of Ipecac—only to find that it was labelled "de-emetinized"! We're reduced at the moment, to treating the wretched devils with morphine and chlorodyne. It doesn't get at the root of the disease, but it keeps 'em quiet. If we run out of them as well, God help us when fighting starts!"

"Can't you get the stuff through from Handeni?"

"Handeni?" said Martock scornfully. "They stick to what they've got at Handeni, and I'm damned if I blame them. They have their own sick to look after—the chaps we send in to them. No, Nairobi's the trouble! Would you believe it when I tell you that the Medical Headquarters of L. of C. are still up there? If only we could move from this devilish, pestilential place . . . !"

But, of course, they couldn't. To begin with, Smuts had to face the fact that his force was not only outgunned but outnumbered, and increasingly outnumbered with every day that passed; nor were the fat little doctor at Handeni and the philologist whom the Kalahari corporal had suggested keeping for seed by any means typical of the officers of von Lettow's command, who were most of them either professional soldiers and sailors, or settlers closely acquainted with the country in which they were fighting. As for his rank and file—they were mostly Africans, well-trained and cunning in bushcraft and happily immune from the endemic diseases that devastated Smuts' army. Finally—and perhaps this factor was more weighty than all the rest—while each step that von Lettow made in retreat brought him nearer to his bases and the supplies and munitions he had concentrated in them, each mile of the British advance took them further away from theirs.

The brigade, in camp at Msiha, knew little of this. They did not guess, for example, that the enemy outnumbered them. They only knew that they seemed condemned to languish, eternally inactive, on half rations or less, in a spot that lay under a special curse of nature, ringed in by impassable walls of watchful mountain whose depressing magnitude was increased by the sullen clouds which brooded over them by day, whose blackness was lit every night by the lightning flickers of the enemy's guns. They had reached a degree of nervous tension in which small things troubled them. At night the whole camp would be thrown into a state of restless anxiety by a single rifle-shot fired by some sepoy, scared by the rustling of lions or leopards in the bush that pressed up to the perimeter. The white troops, in particular, became irritated by the continued absence of mails from their families and war-news from Europe. For all they knew, the war might have been lost or won. Their ignorance of all that was happening elsewhere made them imagine the whole vast business in terms of their own depression and isolation. They were not merely isolated in the heart of Africa; they had been forgotten. Their very existence seemed purposeless. For the first time in the campaign the splendid morale of the army began to fail.

So week followed week, in an awful monotony of semi-starvation and fever, enlivened, at rare intervals, by the excitement of reconnoitring patrols, thrown out in every direction, to keep touch with the enemy. It was the same old story: torrid mile after mile of groping through thickets of thorn under a silence so deathlike that it seemed as if that accursed land were not only devoid of life but had never known it. Then, suddenly, a shattering burst of maxim fire which showed, at least, that the Germans were still alive, and a hurried retreat through the same dense tangles, hampered now by the weight of dead and wounded.

In the cool of the evening, sometimes, British planes drifted over like flights of wild geese in a wedge-formation. Most strangely remote and secure they seemed in the silvery sky. The Kalaharis watched them excitedly from the crest of Kashmiri kopjie, and waited for the mountains to echo the detonations of the bombs they let fall on what they imagined to be the German artillery positions. But the airmen, as Jim knew in his heart, were as blind as any infantry groping in the bush, and their chance of finding a target even more remote. When night fell, the renewal of firing told that the guns were still unscathed.

And the group of Kalaharis, from amid which Jim watched these futile aerial bombardments, was strangely changed. Major Carlow, the second in command, had long since been sent back, protesting, with all an old soldier's virulence, against the doctor's decree; the younger Engelbrecht had been lucky to escape with his life from a brush of patrols; old Macdiarmid had had a leg broken by the kick of a mule; the rank and file, tortured by fever and unhealed *veld*-sores and swarming lice, could never now have been recognized as that *corps d'élite* which had marched with so gallant a swing all down the Pangani. Only Essex, that grim, gay, paladin, with his sinews of steel, continued to assert, in his hard, indestructible elegance, the regiment's original smartness, like one of those fabulous Englishmen of romance who persist in putting on boiled shirts for dinner in the wilds of Congo or Amazon.

Their commander, indeed, seemed immune from all the natural passions or fleshly ills of mankind. Neither sickness, nor starving, nor even this long isolation displaced or deranged a hair upon his fine surface. It was as an unwilling concession to human frailty that he finally permitted Langford, the quartermaster, to ride back along the line in search of mails. Langford ran them to earth, at last, in a tin shed at railhead, and returned to Msiha triumphantly with the latest Nairobi papers and a whole cart-full of mail-bags, beneath which he had craftily secreted a case of whisky for the headquarters mess. With regard to the drink he still had Essex to deal with.

"Are there any rum-rations for the men?" the C. O. enquired shortly. "No? In that case, Langford, I'm afraid we can't take your whisky. Kindly hand it over to the doctor, with my compliments, and tell him he'd better use it among his medical stores."

The gesture was typical of Essex's unfailing *panache*. Langford followed his orders ruefully. But the effect of the mails which he had brought on the Battalion's spirits was more enlivening than that of any rum-ration. As he walked through his lines that evening Jim felt as though an infusion of new blood had replaced the thinned, languid stream that had flowed through their veins. Their eyes were brighter, they carried themselves with a new, proud confidence. All over the camp they sat in small, cheery groups, inspired, as it seemed, to read aloud to each other the contents of their letters and snippets of local gossip from the mildewed pages of two-months-old South African papers. There seemed in them a pressing spiritual need to share with their comrades each piece of domestic news that excited them. Even Furnival fell under the necessity of this strange impulse, insisting on reading aloud to Jim an illiterate scrawl he had received from his street-lady in Durban.

"I told you she was a proper good sort," he proclaimed enthusiastically. "She said she'd write to me; but I never believed that she would."

As for Jim, that evening he inhabited a heaven of his own. At the moment when Langford's cart rolled up with the mails he was on duty; he could do no more than move about the lines with the precious packet burning in his pocket. As soon as he was free he hurried over to a secret sanctuary, a cleft in the rocks of the hill-side reasonably sheltered from the fire of the four-point-ones, and examined it eagerly. It consisted of a drift of arrears of mail from Europe, including one letter from Delahay, and several from his mother and the faithful Miss Minnet. But to these he paid no heed. He was looking for Catherine's. His heart fluttered as he opened the Durban letter, for it must be a reply to the one he had written on board the *Armadale*, and it seemed to him that the whole of his life depended on it. His hands trembled, opening the sacred envelope. *"Jim, dearest . . ."* he read; and then sudden tears blurred his sight.

Its contents were extraordinarily simple, of the kind which he might have expected a Malthus to write. She wasted no words. She had received his letter, and was touched by it. She understood exactly what he had felt, for she had felt just the same herself when his ship swung away from the quay. She believed that she loved him as much as he thought he loved her, but . . . . The letter became full of hesitations. The subject was too complicated for her to trust her clumsy pen to express what she felt without the risk of her being misunderstood. It was so dangerous to put down on paper words that could not be fully understood till they had been sifted by the quick interchange of living voices. Over distances of space and time words lose their freshness; time even altered their meanings. And so. . . . What she really wanted to say, she supposed, was this: All the circumstances of their meeting in Durban had been so romantic, so highly coloured by the uncertainties of war, which made every kind of happiness seem richer if only because it was so precarious, that there was a danger of both of them having lost touch with reality. "I feel, Jim," she wrote, "that at the moment when you met me you might almost have fallen in love with anybody. If it hadn't been me, it would probably have been someone else; and the fact that we loved so many memories in common and were both of us exiles, so to speak, from the things that we loved, made it so much easier for us to fall in love with each other. And so," she went on, "though I do love you terribly, Jim darling, I feel just a little bit frightened. It may be years and years before we meet again, and all sorts of things may happen in the meantime. So I don't want you to feel yourself bound in any way by what you've written. When the war is over you'll be able to see things more clearly."

Jim read these words with dismay. What a measured reply to his own glowing letter! Each concession she made with one hand she took back with the other; every term of endearment that she permitted herself was qualified by suggestions of doubt. The fact that she admitted her love for him—he read the words over and over—was not enough. How cold she was! No . . . it wasn't really coldness. It was merely Cold Orton. Sitting there, in his rocky cleft, under the paling sky now flawed by the yellowish clouds of shell-bursts that hung innocently in the still air above the cavalry lines long after their hurtling fragments had done their worst, Jim's mind was caught back to memories of the Malthuses' vicarage—to that clean, cool order of life under skies so different from these. How sound and sweet to the very core that life was, even his passion admitted. Yet what truth Catherine spoke when she said that the written word lost virtue over time and space! If he could only reply at that moment, while his thoughts were hot, then surely his words might move her! If I went down to the signal-station, he thought, and sent her a cable!

With the other letters unread he abandoned his shelter and stepped out into the open. Not another human being was in sight. At the signal of the first dull boom that had marked the beginning of the evening bombardment all people with any sense had returned to their dugouts. A charge of high-explosive cracked the sky overhead; a red-hot fragment of shell embedded itself in the ground at his feet and spattered his face with earth. Jim smiled to himself. Supposing the damned thing had hit me, he thought, what luck it would be! Why, then, in a week or two I should find myself southward-bound on a hospitalship like poor old Mark; in a week or two I should see her!

His conscience smote him. After all, that wasn't exactly playing the game by Cold Orton standards. Besides which, his luck mightn't be quite so good after all: with the difference of a couple of yards he might easily have been dead at that moment, lying there with the ground beside his body spattered with brains. No, it wasn't good enough! He was making a fool of himself. With the next boom he took shelter incontinently in the nearest dugout. As a matter of fact that particular shell wouldn't ever have hit him. He heard the squeal of a disembowelled mule from the Mountain Battery's lines. But you never knew. . . .

That evening, when the German gunners suspended their firing in favour of dinner, Jim sat out in the open writing his answer to Catherine's letter. All around him the officers and men of the Kalaharis were doing the like. Looking up from his paper, Jim watched them dreamily. A quietude almost devotional overhung the camp. The faces of his silent comrades seemed to him curiously softened, their eyes kindly and distant. The excitement of the mail-bags' arrival had subsided into a mood of contentment tinged with nostalgic melancholy. The minds of the men about him no longer inhabited that shell-scarred hillside, that lost point in the black map of Africa enveloped by so many hundred miles of barren greenness. Their thoughts had scattered, like so many migrant birds, each seeking its own home—to Rhodesian farmsteads parched under the clear skies of winter, to galvanized shacks of the Karoo, to English villages where the smoke of evening rose milkily against green-black shadows of elms now burdened with July leafage. The silence to which they listened was not that of the bush; the odour that tantalized their nostrils far different from the hot savours of trampled brushwood. As they fell on their wretched rations that night they seemed dazed, disorientated, as though their present discomfort and exile were a dream, and the dreams they had lately left the only reality.

Jim sat among them, writing his letter to Catherine. It almost seemed as if his own longing were reinforced by the tenderness of the spirit of the others who surrounded him. It was a letter of six pages, which began with the fierce reproaches that were in his heart. It was cruel of her, he told her, to have written so coldly, so guardedly. She should have calculated the chilling effect of her reserve on his isolation. Two months of silence; and then all he got was this counsel of caution and doubt! She had admitted herself the power of the written word to wound and bewilder at long distance; yet all she had given him gave nothing but pain and bewilderment. He achieved a sort of fierce satisfaction in pointing his reproaches. She deserved to realize the distress she had given, and even to share it.

Yet, when he read through the first pages of what he had written, his heart softened toward her. He saw—not the cold, doubtful, calculating Catherine, that fiction of his own disappointment, but the slender, gentle, almost pathetic figure who had stolen away so quietly through the cheering crowd on the quay at Durban. In a sudden revulsion of feeling he tore up the pages of reproach and began again; and the new letter was as gallant and as false as those that thousands of other men in their scattered trenches were doubtless writing at that moment, in which the horrors and privations of war were glossed over with humour to give comfort and strength and confidence to the women behind the lines. Even so, over the pages in which he retold his love for her there hung a vague shadow. He was mocked by phrases among them which he had written before . . . to Cynthia! . . . And the recurrence of these, turning up like bad pennies, seemed to falsify the ring of the whole. It was humiliating that in the traffic of a passion so different and, as he believed, so much deeper and nobler, the same old coinage should serve its turn. Each burning phrase that he had used in his letters to Cynthia seemed to him like a treachery to Catherine. Yet, strive as he might, no others would come to his mind. Aghast at the awful poverty of the language of love, he supposed he must let them pass. At least he had rid his mind of some of the heat that was in it. To-morrow, with a clearer brain, he would write to her again.

As they gathered for dinner over their scanty rations the actual present reasserted itself. The usually taciturn Langford had brought back far more than mere mail-bags from the rear: Boer tobacco, in yellow bags, which seemed almost tasteless after the black native twist they had smoked, and news . . . great news! He had heartening stories to tell of the things that were happening behind them. While they sat and smoked luxuriously they dragged them out, one by one. At Handeni, he told them, in his slow Somerset voice, the Second Brigade, under Hannyngton, was lying, now reinforced by two newly raised battalions of King's African Rifles: "As smart as be damned," Langford said, "with a double allowance of machine-guns." Then the navy had mopped up Tanga and Pagani and probably, by now, had occupied Bagamoyo.

"Thanks to *us*," said Furnival. "We did all the dirty work for 'em."

"That isn't the point," said Langford. "The fall of Tanga is going to shorten our L. of C. by two hundred miles. In a week or two we shall probably be on full rations again instead of this muck." He gazed ruefully at the melancholy, gelatinous hump of a starved trek-ox which supplied their dinner that evening. "By the way," he went on, "there's been a big scrap on the Somme. They say that the German line's broken. A hell of a lot of casualties: the papers are full of them. But then, I suppose it's worth it. What's much more important to us is the fact that Brits is concentrating."

"Tell that to the navy," said Engelbrecht scornfully. "We've heard about Brits' cavalry before. We've heard about nothing else for the last seven weeks."

"But I've *seen* 'em!" said Langford triumphantly.

"Take his temperature," Furnival murmured, "the poor chap's delirious."

"There must be a thousand of them between here and Korogwe," Langford protested. "I scrounged some tobacco off them. They look just the stuff for this country. Sheppard talks of mobility. . . . Well, now we've got it all right! A harder looking lot of blighters I never saw in my life: real *tak-haars,* with great Moses beards hanging down to their waists. No transport to worry 'em. They carry their rations with them."

"Well, *we* could do that at the present rate," Jim laughed.

But Langford was deadly serious. "This fellow Brits is a knockout. Six foot six in his socks, and the rest to match. A terrific fellow —not a bit our idea of a brass-hat. They say he'll drink with his troopers one moment and flog them with a *sjambok* the next. Illiterate. He can't read dispatches, they tell me, let alone maps. But when he gets going, von Lettow will know all about it!"

"I don't mind betting he knows about it already," said Furnival, "if old Langford's not dreaming."

They went on chaffing poor Langford about his Mounted Brigade; but in spite of their chaff, the news put new life into all of them. If the cavalry were really concentrating, that would mean an end to the stultifying inactivity of life at Msiha. As soon as the Mounted Brigade came up, and Van Deventer moved from Kondoa . . . Van

Deventer, according to recent reports, had half of his force in hospital and had lost a couple of thousand mules and horses!

Yet Van Deventer moved on July the twentieth. In a single leap, as spectacular as that which had carried them through to Kondoa, the famished South Africans of the Second Division were astride the Central Railway at Kilimatinde. This great news ran through the camp at Msiha like a burning cross. Two days later Smuts joined them again. The presence of this small, red-bearded man with his cold, distant eyes was always the signal of strenuous action impending. On the morning after his arrival an order came through from Brigade. All South African troops—the Kalaharis included—were to parade on the level ground of the abandoned camp. "That means that we're for it," Jim thought; yet, strangely enough, the tents in the camp were not struck, and neither ammunition nor emergency rations were served out. Was the G.O.C. going to address them? That, somehow, didn't sound like Smuts.

They marched down from their hillside to the plain in column of route and drew up two deep. It was the first time since Buiko that they had paraded for a general inspection. Though he knew how heavy their losses had been, Jim had never realized till that moment how terribly the regiment had shrunken. Its full strength was now no greater than that of a machine-gun company. Even as they stood there, waiting for the staff to arrive, three men were forced to fall out by paroxysms of fever. In the distance a little group of red tabs appeared. The Kalaharis' tired limbs stiffened to a higher degree of attention. As the generals passed the South African Infantry on Jim's left the sound of a feeble cheer came echoing along the line.

Two figures detached themselves from the knot of staff-officers and began a leisurely inspection. One of them was Smuts. The other, as they drew nearer, Jim saw was a corpulent, bearded stranger in a general's uniform. He walked heavily, pulling along his swollen limbs and body with difficulty, pausing from time to time, to catch his breath. As the two came abreast Jim heard in the ranks behind him a running whisper—"It's Botha . . . it's Louis Botha!"—and his heart beat fast, with a sudden infusion of pride and loyalty. For this doomed man, who, as a final sacrifice, had dragged his stricken, dropsical body into the heart of tropical Africa, was not merely the military genius who had conquered German South West, but the wise statesman who had saved a whole continent for the Empire. Though Smuts inspired passionate faith, Jim felt that, of the two, this pitiful figure was the greater. There was a gentleness, a humanity positively beautiful in those blotched, ravaged features. They demanded not only pity and admiration and faith, but love. In front of the Kalaharis' line Botha paused for one moment, murmuring a barely audible sentence in Dutch to Smuts, who briefly replied. Then he nodded his bearded head and smiled, waved his hand to them in most unmilitary fashion, and passed on his painful way. Jim knew that he would remember the kindliness of that smile as long as he lived. He knew also that no man who had seen Louis Botha that day would ever see him again.

That evening a curious restlessness pervaded the camp. In its seething atmosphere scores of rumours hatched out like ephemerids. Disquieting, some of them. It was whispered, for instance, that the obvious jealousies of the British Generals for each other and their combined dislike of Smuts had now reached a head. The staff talked openly of this. On the other hand the moment for advance, it was said, had now arrived; Louis Botha would command it in person. That, Jim couldn't swallow. Poor Botha's fighting days, he felt sure, were over. Next moment they heard that the navy had swooped in on Dar-es-salaam, and the German Government had surrendered. As a corrective to this, the enemy, in a desperate *sortie*, had cut the line of supply just South of Handeni! "No, that won't do, that's impossible," Langford maintained, "they couldn't do that with Brits on the Lukigura."

They all laughed at him. Brits was poor Langford's King Charles's head.

"I refuse to believe," said Furnival, "there's any such person!"

Yet Langford had been right after all, as Jim and Furnival knew when, a few days later, a detachment of that legendary corps rode into the camp at sunset with the Gargantuan general towering among them. They looked, indeed, like denizens of another world; huge bearded fellows from the back-veld with shaggy locks and close-set pale eyes, riding long-stirruped, their shanks sweeping the grass as they rode. Their mounts were as rugged and emaciated as themselves; ill-groomed and ill-bred, they seemed fitter for a knacker's yard than for the performance of a sweeping cavalry movement. The horses' knees staggered beneath the weight of these monstrous riders with their shoulder-slung carbines, their bundles of forage hanging beside them and bulging saddle-bags.

"My God, only look at 'em!" Furnival groaned. "Why, there's the White Knight!" He pointed at an enormous horseman so encumbered that he seemed indeed to be carrying a complete kitchen battery along with him. Jim laughed, rather shamefully, for he knew that the Boers were sensitive. Then, suddenly, Furnival saw his face light up. Jim was running forward to meet this odd apparition. A moment later he was wringing Hans Prinsloo's hand and looking up into Hans Prinsloo's childlike eyes.

"Why, Hans, old *kerel*," he cried, "whatever are you doing here?"

Hans Prinsloo smiled solemnly. "We sailed from Durban a month ago. They came round to Schoengesicht to tell us the war was not over. It was an awkward time, for that devil of a river was at its old games, and the work all behind because of the men they've taken for the Cape Corps. Still, what could one say? Katjie knows what to do on the farm, and old Carel Morkel has promised to give her a hand. The *predikant* wrote a letter for us to London to tell your cousin I was gone. Walter Delahay will be on his way out to Schoengesicht now if I know him. They tell us that all the Germans are over there in the *berg*," he went on, "and Coen Brits is going to surround them."

"You won't get far on this brute, Hans," Jim smiled, with a glance at the horse's staring coat and heaving ribs.

"On this or another," Hans Prinsloo answered blandly. "They say that the life of a horse in this country is just three weeks. Poor devils, they die like flies. This is the third I've had in a month. He has a good heart."

He gave the poor beast a whack with his *sjambok* to quicken his paces, for the rest of the ragged detachment were streaming on to Headquarters. Jim walked rapidly beside him, talking of Schoengesicht, while Hans told him of all that happened during the last year. He spoke, as he always spoke, with a sort of grim fatalism. It was obvious that this war, like the German South West campaign, meant nothing to him. The order to go on *commando* had reached him, and he had ridden out to fight with the Germans as he rode out to fight with the river. Even now his single mind was still set on his work at Schoengesicht, amid which this warlike interlude was no more than a passing incident.

"And now I must go on, Jim," he said, as he solemnly shook hands again, surrounding Jim's fingers with his gigantic, earth-coloured paw. "If you send a letter to Katjie you must tell her that I have seen you and not to bother her head about fever-pills. I have plenty left. There's no time for me to get anyone to write to her. We have to keep moving, with horse-sickness everywhere and nothing but fly-belts."

He smiled, as he belaboured his beast into a tired tripple. Jim watched his gigantic figure, much bigger than the horse that carried it, breasting a little rise under the wondering scrutiny of a detachment of dwarf-like Ghurkas returning to their lines with *chagghals* full of muddy water. If war itself were a savage anachronism, surely Hans and his friends of Brits' Brigade were in keeping with it. There was something mediæval about those dour, harsh figures—mediæval, or older still, Jim thought, as there came to his mind a vision of the mounted hordes that swarmed over the Danube plain when Rome was falling. Even so, like White Knights, as Furnival said, those conquerors must have ridden. The very starkness of their manner of life and equipment impressed him.

"I've seen Brits myself," he told Langford that evening.

"Oh, have you? I've more news than that," said Langford, who was still sore on the subject. "The Mounted Brigade's on the Lukigura, two thousand strong. They've killed three thousand horses on the way down. We're for it, my boy. Sheppard's moving at dawn to-morrow."

At last! It was with a sense of extreme relief that they marched, next morning, out of that accursed place. Simultaneously the Mounted Brigade of Brits poured forth from the Lukigura. They left their tents standing empty in the camp at Msiha for the German gunners to play with. They marched warily forward, for fear that their dust might betray them.

"And I hope to God," said Furnival, from the bottom of his heart, "that I shall never set eyes on this cursed place again!"

The Punjabis, detached from Sheppard's force, moved forward in a feinted attack on the position that covered the German guns straight in front of them. The rest of the Brigade, Kalaharis included, made a bold sweep to eastward. Once more the jaws of Smuts' forceps were opened wide. When they closed, in the rear of the hills, von Lettow should be inside them.

It was good, at least, Jim thought, to be moving again; to feel once more the tense exultation of an advance, that sense of being part of a mighty weapon of well-tempered steel cleaving its way inexorably through the thick bush. The very smells and sounds of their determined progress, the hot wafts of brushwood, the drooping calls of the horn-bills, brought back to his mind the atmosphere of those gallant days, now almost forgotten, in which the victorious brigade had swept down the Pangani with the impetus of a torrent refreshed by rains. The broken fire of the Punjabis, already in action on their right, heightened his spirits. Furnival nodded approvingly.

"If only they can hold the blighters till we get round 'em!" he said.

Yet, as the sun rose, and the sound of distant firing died slowly away, their first enthusiasm seemed to lose its fine edge. The brigade, Jim had to confess, was not what it had been. There was too much fever in its blood. The results of six weeks of starved immobility at Msiha were beginning to tell on them. Was it mere imagination, Jim asked himself, or was it plain fact that the bush through which they now dragged and forced themselves, step by step, was thicker and more actively hostile than any they had met before? Was it true that the air they breathed into their pumping lungs was denser, more steamy, more utterly devitalized than that of the Pangani? He only knew that the intervals between the halts that were granted them seemed to grow longer and longer, the ten minutes of rest incredibly short.

By evening they found themselves stumbling and hacking their way through stuff that seemed identical with that which they had penetrated at first. However fast or slowly they advanced, it seemed to close in behind them so thickly that the prospect of a retreat looked as hopeless as that of advancing. Not a sign of the enemy. Their only enemy, indeed, was the obstinate thorn.

"Shall we ever get out of it?" Jim thought. "We *must* get out of it!"

An officer of Sheppard's staff pushed his way forward. His tunic and shorts were torn to ribbons, his face smeared with blood.

"Do him good!" Jim thought bitterly. "He ought to take a turn with a *panga*."

"Hard going," he said, with a wry smile at Jim. "Is the bush getting any thinner?"

"Better try it," said Furnival, turning round with an ugly leer, in his hand a *panga* stained with the blood from his torn wrist and forearm.

The staff-officer smiled. "It's not my fault, you know," he said. "I have to report to General Sheppard. He's getting uneasy. You see we're four or five hours behind our time-table."

"Well, it's not our fault either," snapped Furnival, "if we're behind time. Just have a look at the bloody stuff for yourself. We're not rhinos or buffaloes!"

The staff-captain nodded his head abruptly and left them.

"Decent fellow," said Furnival charitably. "Not bad for an Etonian. Too good for the staff. It's rough luck on old Sheppard too, getting hung up like this. They say that Division has a down on him as it is. Well, come on, let's get at it!"

They got at it; continued at it for another two hours. If they advanced half a mile in that time the reckoning was generous. The sun sank. They worked now in a dim, subaqueous light. They must be nearing some river, it seemed, for the trees grew taller. In front of them stood one, a huge spathodea Jim thought, with a cold gleaming trunk that shot straight upward in search of air and sun like a pillar of silver. "*Thy neck is a tower of ivory*," Jim thought. "My God, how lovely!" And his mind ran on: "*A fountain of gardens, a well of living waters and streams from Lebanon*." His lips cracked with dryness, his mouth like a kiln: what torture to think of water!

"Come along, old chap, get a move on!" said Furnival cheerfully. "Why, anyone 'ld think you were in love!"

He had heard that before. Who on earth had said that before? Was it Julian? He couldn't remember. Catherine's beautiful coolness. To lie down in the shade, with his head in her lap. . . .

An order came through from the rear. They were to halt for ten minutes and then retire. It filled them with blank amazement. To retire? After all this? In place of the relief which they might have felt they knew only resentment.

"That red-hatted blighter's told them some story," cried Furnival indignantly. One would have thought he was anxious to go on cutting bush till he dropped. And so, probably, he was. But an order, after all, was an order; and the maligned staff-captain had doubtless told Sheppard nothing but the bitter truth. How well they had done their work might be gathered from the ease with which they retreated. In less than four hours the brigade was back at that accursed Msiha.

And, at dawn next day, off again. . . .

This time marching was easier. Profiting by the experience of that day of frustration, which had carried them, in fact, to the level of the main enemy position, but left them separated from it by miles of impassable swamp, they swept further eastward, along the course of the Lukigura. Yet a sense of failure now brooded over their march. They had missed their connection, as Furnival prettily put it; and, though in the utter obscurity of their movement they did not know it, the other outflanking column had met the same fate, floundering in a chaos of blocked transport amid that sandy tangle of hills.

"It's poor old Sheppard I'm thinking of," said Jim. "Lord, how sick he must feel! Still, I suppose we may do it yet," he added, vaguely.

"Do it? I'm damned if I know what we're supposed to be doing now," Furnival complained.

He spoke truly. Whatever Smuts's plans had been originally, it was evident that they had broken down. That swift enveloping movement, so easily convincing on paper, had petered out ignominiously on either wing; in the swamps on the left, in the mountains on the right. Though they marched now more freely through a country that seemed to them paradise compared with the purgatory of the day before, their movement lacked zest, if only because it lacked purpose. They were so doubtful themselves as to where they were going that it was difficult to believe that the command had a clearer idea. No enemy opposed them. When they reached their original objective it was only to find the German trenches deserted.

"So much the better for us," said Langford cheerfully, "if old Brits has got in behind them . . ."

Old Brits, or rather his advance guard under Enslin, had done so; had engaged the main German force for a couple of hours; had been forced to retire before superior numbers and for lack of the artillery which they had been forced to leave in the hills. Von Lettow had slipped through again!

The disheartening news fell icily on the hearts of Sheppard's Brigade. Their disappointment found vent in murmurs of resentful suspicion. *Why* had Enslin retired? The answer was easy enough. It was the answer that, through all time, has softened the bitterness of military failure. The Boers had funked it; betrayed them . . . them, who, in their blood and sweat, had toilfully laid the foundations of victory over so many months! When the end lay within their grasp, the Dutchmen had given one glance at the enemy and fled! They were a pack of cowards. It was a damnable piece of treachery. Enslin should be court-martialled. Would Smuts have the courage to punish these traitors of his own race? Of course not! All these damned Dutchmen were as thick as thieves. There was nothing to choose between them. Brits' men, it was said, by their own confession, had never meant to do any fighting; they had come up to German East to spy out the land, with the idea of finding new farms for themselves as a reward for imaginary services. A wave of racial bitterness swept the ranks, overwhelming all memories of Van Deventer's heroic stand at Kondoa. All Dutchmen were suspect now—even Smuts himself had lost some of the magic that hitherto had clung to his name. The downright Furnival was more bitter than all the rest, and Jim half agreed with him. Yet always, in the back of his mind, he found it hard to believe that a man of Hans Prinsloo's type (and Brits' brigade was full of them) could ever have shown himself a coward, much less a traitor.

However discouraged they may have been, Smuts was not discouraged. There remained between him and the railway one more great obstacle: the Wami, a river even wider than the Pangani, with steep banks undercut by its swift current, on which the enemy might still be compelled to stand. The orders came through so swiftly that there was no more time for suspicion or grumbling. It was now or never, Sheppard said. Then let it be now! After two days of long forced marching, made dream-like for Jim by a fatigue that reduced the whole column to silence, they crossed the river by a providentially unbroken footbridge and descended, at last, on the standing enemy's flank.

That night, lying exhausted but sleepless on the edge of a swamp of papyrus, whose plumed rustlings filled them with a sense of awed intentness, they listened to the fire of outposts that faced one another with the river between. At dawn, news and orders came through. Brits, it seemed, had forded the river to westward. (Brits . . .! They laughed when they heard the name of that broken reed.) The Punjabis, with what was left of the Kalaharis, supported, for once, by artillery, the Fifth South African Battery, were to advance on the enemy's flank and attack at once.

"Well, we're for it at last," said Furnival.

"Yes, we're for it," Jim thought. Even if he had been unaware of their orders he would have known they were for it. There was something uncanny in that dawn's shattering beauty; the dazzling whiteness of the cloud-cap drifting away from the hills, the fluent golden expanses of knee-high grass over which, as they moved forward, the sun imposed shadows of their grotesque, helmeted figures. That loveliness was so intense as to be almost frightening; such perfection could never survive, he thought, the spite of heaven. Such peace! The great trees that brooded over the Wami utterly motionless, as if they were still asleep; small bronze doves cooing in their branches; the grass alive with lazy-pinioned butterflies spreading their velvet-eyed wings in the early sun.

They moved warily in open order. One mile and a half. By the flashes of the guns overnight Furnival had calculated that the point where they bivouacked could not be more than two miles from the enemy. Was it possible that they were going to find his trenches abandoned again? It seemed incredible that mutilation and death should lie crouched, like a wild beast waiting to spring, beneath so rich and drowsy a quietude. The wind of dawn dropped. All the green things seemed to be listening. Only the doves kept up their gentle, amorous complaint, the butterflies their heavy fluttering. Now the grasses grew higher—high enough for a man to take shelter. Like a low bank of golden mist they stretched before them, above which the sparse branches of twisted thorn trees emerged. A flight of small birds, like linnets flocking in an English November, swept across their vision with a sigh of fluttered wings. Then, over the whole front of their advance, the tall grass crackled into flames.

"We've bumped them all right!" shouted Furnival. "Lie down, you damned fool!" He clutched at the legs of a tall Kalahari who stood staring about him with a smile of shocked bewilderment, and pulled him down. Jim heard his loud laugh above the clatter of fire. He was thinking to himself, with a sort of stupid satisfaction: "Didn't I say this was too good to last?" The men beside him were dragging a machine-gun into action. From the rear he heard a series of short, barking explosions, which made him think, for a moment, that they were now being shelled. It was nothing of the sort. The South African field-pieces in support of them had opened fire. Furnival, on his left, was grinning at him and waving his hand. "Good work!" he shouted. "Good work!" He pointed to the bursting shrapnel hanging in pretty white puffs of cloud over the German lines. Another small flock of weaver-birds, regardless of the firing, came scurrying over the line. Something hit Jim's hand. "Good Lord, I'm wounded!" he thought. "Impossible!" The thing that had hit him was a warm blob of crushed bones and feathers caught in mid-air. "What a damned shame!" he thought. "A poor little beast like that!" Then he laughed at himself. A ridiculous sense of proportion!—for the man on his immediate right had just fallen forward on his face without a sound. Jim tried to pretend that he hadn't seen him. He forced himself to speak.

"This gun's getting damned hot," he said.

"Well, it hasn't jammed yet. That's one thing," said the fellow who had swarmed up alongside to take the dead man's place in feeding the belt. They looked at each other, smiling. "That's it," Jim thought; "both of us pretending that this is a jolly game." As they gazed, the man's smile turned sickly; his eyes suddenly widened with surprise. "I . . . I'm hit, sir," he murmured, and gently collapsed on the other.

The air was beginning to waver above the hot gun. All the sky in front was now fouled with shell-smoke. Somebody, a stretcher-bearer he supposed, had dragged away the body of the man who had last fallen. The South African field guns, for all their rapid fire, seemed to have made no impression on the enemy trenches; the whole front was still webbed in a sleet of flying nickel.

"Are we going to stay here all day?" Jim thought. "It can't go on like this for ever. Hour after hour!" It was a quarter of an hour at the most. "The ammunition won't last. I wonder if the blighters know, and are bringing more up."

"Well, Redlake? How goes it?" The precise voice was that of Essex. "A warm corner this. I'm afraid we've lost rather heavily. Enjoying it?"

Jim smiled wryly, evading the question. "What about ammunition, sir?"

"Don't worry about that. Pass the word along to fix bayonets."

"Bayonets . . . bayonets . . . bayonets . . ." The murmur spread down the line. Essex melted away.

"I haven't got a bayonet," Jim thought. "Of course. Revolver . . ." He hadn't used his since the day when he had met the sleeping philologist on the Lukigura. He felt for the holster uneasily. It wasn't there. What the devil could have happened to it? Wriggling through the grass, he supposed. But what was the use of taking part in a bayonet charge unarmed? As the order came through he thought suddenly of the dead man beside him; he snatched up his rifle and wrenched the bayonet from his belt. They were scrambling to their knees, lurching forward in a curious, crouching run, through the gold mist of grass. Jim felt foolish—the rifle in one hand, the unfixed bayonet in the other. For one instant he looked behind him to see the plain dappled with other dun shapes all clumsily following. A flat-nosed Mongolian face was lifted. The Kashmiris, he thought! Gurkha *kukris!* The enemy had reason to fear those curved blades more than any bayonet. He went stumbling on, in this faintly ludicrous way, through the golden grass. The guns, behind, had lengthened their range. He must almost have reached by now the area which they had been shelling. "Keep down . . . keep down!" a voice within kept telling him. "Why the devil haven't I been hit?" he thought. "They must be firing too high. The German *askaris* always fire high when they're rattled. There can't be much further to go . . ." In his blindness, stumbling over a man who had fallen, he lurched into somebody.

"Look out! Where the hell are you going?" The obstruction was Furnival. "Hello, Redlake, you old devil, it's you, is it?" he shouted. "Last lap! All together! Have at 'em, boys. Lew-lew-lew-lew-lew!" The fellow was mad. He slashed at the golden grass with a *kiboko*, a thong of hippo-hide, as he plunged on. The men on the left gave a roar—an inhuman sound, like the cry of some savage monster. They leapt in the air, then crashed down in the German trenches.

Jim pressed forward too, in a final spurt, his limbs obeying some command in which conscious will had no part. Then his body spun round. He toppled. His right leg. It was as though some heavy blunt thing, a wooden beam, had been hurled at it. My leg's gone, he thought. It must be a shell. Waterloo! Someone's lost a leg, they told Wellington. "Has he, by God?" said the duke. He looked cautiously. The leg was still there. So what could it be? A dark shape flung itself at him from behind. He raised himself to resist it. The sky went black as the butt of a charging Ghurka's rifle caught his temple and knocked the sense out of him.

VII. *Recessional*

THAT knock on the head which, but for a freak of luck, might have smashed in his skull like an egg-shell, saved Jim providentially from thirty-six hours of agony. He emerged from the anæsthesia of his concussion to find himself laid like a corpse on a canvas stretcher in the shade of a bell-tent with the sound of Martock's sombre voice in his ears. He felt sore and sickly. It hurt him to move his eyes. It was as though some stiff exudate glued their balls to his orbits. That right leg . . . There was something wrong. Had he lost it or not? He tried to move. He could move his toes all right; but the rest of the limb was a painful ingot of lead. A pig of lead . . . that was the word. A pig of a leg. Where was Furnival? He found himself asking, and wondering why.

"Don't worry your head about Furnival," Martock was saying, rather crossly, Jim thought.

As long as you could move your toes, Ernest used to say, your leg wasn't broken. It wasn't his toes, it was his knee that he wanted to move.

"Furnival carried you in on his back," Martock went on, "when they'd cleared the trenches."

"Where are we?"

"Just where you were two days ago. You've the devil's own luck, Redlake."

"Two days? . . . What do you mean?"

"Concussion. A crack on the head. I don't know how you got it. I'm just going to dress your knee. I shan't hurt you more than I can help."

Jim clenched his teeth. Even so a cry escaped him. Not hurt, indeed! The blighter was probing the joint with red-hot needles. The pain made him sick; it wasn't like ordinary pain.

"My God, Martock . . . stop! Just one minute!"

"All over, old chap. Stout fellow! Joint pains are the deuce. 'Sympathetic,' we call 'em."

Sympathetic! An odd word, Jim thought. He remembered Mark Malthus's elbow, and took fright: Mark's arm in the bucket at Handeni!

"I say, Martock, I'm not going to lose it, am I?"

"Don't imagine such things. If you had needed an amputation you'd have had it by now. Put that out of your mind." He smiled as he turned away. There was something else that Jim wanted to ask him. Whatever could it be? Ah, yes . . . "Oh, Martock . . . I say . . ." he struggled to speak again.

"Yes?"

"That scrap . . . Have they got von Lettow?"

Martock shook his head grimly.

"Fallen back on the railway. You gave him a hammering, though. Cleared their trenches at the point of the bayonet. Any number of guns and prisoners. We're chock-a-block with them. Now keep quiet."

"Is the regiment still here?"

"The Kalaharis? Good Lord, no. They're thirty miles south of this by now. G.H.Q. has gone through. You're well out of it anyway; there's dirty fighting ahead. Good-bye, old fellow."

"I'm out of it," Jim thought. "I'm out of it! An honourable wound. That's what they call it, I suppose. I'm out of it, am I?"

He couldn't believe he was out of it. For the moment he couldn't even say he was glad to be out of it. He and Furnival had worked hand in hand for so long. Those rotten old maxims took some knowing. He knew all the tricks they could play and how to humour them. He couldn't believe that they could possibly get on without him. And the regiment! Old Essex, so gallant in spite of his poses—such an exquisite paladin. There were so damned few of them left. It was just like his rotten luck to be knocked out of it before the end of the show, like Carlow, like Engelbrecht, like that poor old stiff Macdiarmid. Why, none of the old gang were left now but Langford! Closing his eyes, Jim seemed to see the remnant of the Kalaharis, no more than half a company now, trailing off into the distance of grassland and bush everlasting, marching on and on and on and on into the heart of a continent until nothing was left of them—nothing more than a name! Yet what a name that had been! He was part of their name. *Old Soldiers never die, never die, never die. Old soldiers never die: they simply fade away.*

Fade away . . .

"I'm out of it," his mind repeated. And now the words suddenly assumed a new significance which stole through his bruised body, his confused and aching brain, like the influence of some subtle anodyne as soothing as sleep itself, softening the stiff bands with which he had steeled his spirit, relaxing the tensity of stretched nerves so long maintained that it had become a part of his body's unconscious mechanism. He knew that his eyes need be no longer wary, scanning his surroundings for the least tremor that betrayed a hostile movement, that his ears need no longer be strained to listen for a rustling leaf or the snap of a twig with a vigilance on which not only his own life but the lives of his comrades depended—that awful vigilance which made even beauty suspect. He knew that the bush would no longer be his enemy; that for him, this strange country had returned to its original innocence. It shocked him now to think that, even for a moment, he had been fool enough not to clutch at this incredible relief. He supposed it was just because it had been too good to believe; that any other condition of life than the purgatory which he had grown to accept as natural during the last few months seemed beyond all possible experience.

"I'm out of it," he thought, and his exulting mind ran on impetuously over the vast lengths of country their progress had penetrated and devoured, back along the Pangani, beneath ghostly Kilimanjaro, to the cool, sweet upland air of some hospital in Nairobi. "They won't keep me long there," he thought. "Before I know what has happened I shall find myself whisked off to the coast and shoved on a hospital-ship—then southward, southward, to Durban. To Durban and Catherine. God, it's too much to bear! Almost too much to be true!" If the wound wasn't serious? But Martock had said quite seriously: "You're out of it." *Out of it!* After South Africa, England! With Marcus and Catherine, perhaps. Thorpe Folville . . . Cold Orton . . ."

A vision of England came to him: soft greens, blue distances; the smell of a covert-side, cubbing, in early autumn. To share that with Catherine . . . now! That was what she belonged to. She had been lovely enough in Africa. How much lovelier would she be there, transported from those fierce lights into that mild sunshine, the cool, austere air that, even in Natal, enveloped her. The England he dreamed of now was the England of before the war, a gay, indolent land. That the war should have set its solemn mark on her never entered his mind. For him there was only one war: the war that had crackled and smouldered like fire in the bush. For others it might go on smouldering and crackling a little longer. For him it was over, thank God! He was out of it—*out of it!*

So, innocently, he thought. Yet, that night, the pain that had sickened him under Martock's dressing returned, of itself, to torture. Martock gave him morphine. A blessed relief, but temporary. He cried for more.

"We've got to go easy on this," said Martock firmly.

Nor would friendship avail him. The man was adamant. Their stock of morphine was shrinking; with stiff fighting ahead they had to consider their reserves. Jim saw little of Martock; for the casualties on the Wami had been heavy, and surgeons were few. He was haunted by a persistent fear that his bandages were too tight. His wound smelt abominably. Did that mean gangrene? he wondered. Mark Malthus's arm had been gangrened.

Martock only smiled at his questions, and a violent recurrence of fever gave Jim something else to think about, or rather reduced his thoughts to the incoherence of a nightmare in which they wavered and melted like the bush which used to dissolve in the air that quivered above his hot maxim barrel.

In this condition of spiritual anæsthesia they might do what they damned well liked with him. He was neither interested nor surprised when, two days later, he was hoisted from his stretcher, then dumped into a kind of hammock slung on poles, and carried away with the soothing, swaying motion of a dinghy riding a smooth ground-swell, through hour after hour of a desolate monotony of bush. Too exhausted by pain and malaria now to know or care where they carried him, the third day's remission of fever brought to his eyes the familiar, detested sight of the long grass *bandas* out of which, so many long weeks before, Martock's hospital had been shelled. Msiha again! Could he never be rid of that cursed spot? Yet how quiet, how deserted, how almost homely it seemed now!

Martock suddenly appeared at his elbow, and with him the elderly doctor of the Motor Ambulance Convoy whose car Jim and Furnival had boarded approaching the Lukigura. He nodded and smiled at Jim.

"Well, this *is* a change," he said. "You've been in the wars, old chap."

The fact was so obvious that the conventional phrase sounded comical. Poor old Garth had certainly been in the wars himself since Jim last saw him enthralled by his baptism of fire. He looked harder, greyer; very different from the fussy unmilitary figure that Jim remembered with his new, stiff Sam Browne belt and the stethoscope hung round his neck.

"You'll find it a treat after this," he said with pride, "to get into one of my ambulances, and so will you, Martock."

"Oh, *I*'m all right," Martock laughed; but, as he spoke, his teeth chattered, his shoulders twitched backward with a fit of shivering. He had brought back his wretched convoy for more than two days of marching with fever on him. When they hoisted Jim's stretcher into the Ford he was cheered, but by no means surprised, to find Martock lying beside him.

But the ambulance wasn't a treat. Apart from its greater speed, the hammock in which Jim had travelled before was heaven compared with it. Every crater that had torn up the road, every corduroy of tree-trunks with which it had been repaired, communicated its jolts, through the broken springs, directly to the burning point of his shattered knee-joint. Jim could only surrender his body to its scant mercy as the Ford jolted onward pitilessly over the ruins of the German road, where the ambulance that followed the tail of their own could be seen making sickening rolls and plunges, like an ill-ballasted cargo-boat in a Biscay gale.

As Jim watched its mad flounderings, hour after hour, looking backward from where he lay beside the sleeping Martock, he couldn't help pitying the invisible wounded inside it and the anxiety of the driver who steered it with such concern for his freight. For mile after mile the road was scattered with pitiful wreckage: gaunt cages of ribs, from which vultures and hyænas had stripped the rotting flesh; carts and waggons abandoned with smashed felloes and axles; lorries, lying like scrap-iron, and, more disheartening still, drove after drove of doomed horses being herded back to the railway, staggering to browse on clumps of dried herbage. With the awful automatism of a wasp that will chew at a fly when its head has been severed from its body, they fed till they dropped, and became, in their noisome end, what the soldiers called "Brits' violets." No human features, Jim thought, could have shown such hopelessness as the faces of these poor beasts, round whose frothing lips and glazed eyes greedy flies buzzed in myriads, over whose heads the waiting vultures hovered in obscene clouds.

Hard by Kangata he recognized the wrecked lorry of the Canadian with whom he and Furnival had spent the night. The tarpaulin tilt was gone, its stores removed; the driver had left it. Had he died, alone at his post, still dreaming of Winnipeg? Had the lions, against whom he had built his *boma* of thorn, crept up in the night? As Jim dreamily asked himself this, a strange thing happened. Avoiding the carcase of an ox, the driver of the following ambulance had swerved to the left. A huge detonation shook the air like a shell-burst. A shell? Impossible! Jim thought, as his own car pulled up short with a jerk of agony. As the cloud of dust cleared he saw that the front of the following ambulance was gone; the whole of it, driver and engine included, had been blown sky-high. Garth was running back, ludicrously waving his arms, his plump face like chalk. Their own driver joined him. Martock woke.

"What the devil was that?"

"A land-mine, I suppose. The driver's been blown to blazes. God knows what's happened to the fellows behind."

Garth came back, shaking his head helplessly. Jim caught his words. "The whole engine blown right through him. Poor devil . . . poor devil! We shall have to make room somehow. Tch-tch-tch-tch!" he clucked, like an anxious hen. Martock raised himself up on his elbow feebly and called to him:

"I say, Garth, I say . . . Look here . . . My temperature's gone. I can walk all right."

"Don't be a damned fool," Jim told him. But there was no stopping Martock. He crawled over his stretcher and let himself down to the ground. Garth, too flustered to protest, allowed him to take his seat beside one of the drivers. A sergeant of the Loyal North Lancs with a shell-smashed shoulder was moved in beside Jim. His wound smelt atrociously. "Well, so does mine," Jim thought.

So, on and on . . . Past Handeni with its castellated prison, to whose gardens the white tent-roofs of the Lowland Division Clearing Station gave an air of primness. Jim's old friend, the gnarled Scotch orderly, peered in at the tail of the ambulance with a welcoming grin.

"Through the knee? That's a bonny place," he said, with his accustomed grimness. "I'm thinking we won't keep you here, then; you'll be booked right through. Handeni is no so bad now we've got things straightened. Ay, and rations is better. When you get to Korogwe you'll be finding yourself in the lap of luxury."

The road to Korogwe was certainly less villainous than the other, with some pretensions to a metalled surface. Its red lengths, quivering in mirages of heat, were flanked by misshapen baobabs: the openness of the parkland on either side gave an impression—not of civilization, but, at least, of a lesser savagery. Forty miles in two days. That was not bad going for ambulances, though, indeed, in their palmy days, the brigade had covered as much on foot.

Martock, now recovered from his fever, came round and chatted with Jim whenever they halted. His companion in trouble, the sergeant of the Loyal North Lancs, took a little while to overcome the regular soldier's shyness of an officer's uniform; his prostrate body seemed to stiffen automatically whenever Jim addressed him; but when once he had begun to talk he never stopped. Sergeant Coward (for such was the name that belied this courageous person) was evidently a wag by profession. He came from Chorley, was Lancashire to the core, and ready to "oblige" at any moment with songs from the repertoire of George Formby. Having been blown up twice already since he was wounded—once in the *bandas* at Msiha and again in the ambulance—he was cheerfully prepared to be blown up a third time, being firmly, if unreasonably, convinced that such accidents ran in threes. Outside the life of his own company and these memories of home he had no interests whatever. His service in India had apparently left no marks on his brain but a few phrases of anglicized Hindustani, and East Africa meant as little to him as India. Only two regrets pursued this cheerful soul: the first was the fact that he hadn't been able to make himself decent (in other words, shave) for ten days, the second the loss of an elephant, carved in teak, which he had bought in Bombay, carried with him all through the campaign, and lost, with the rest of his kit, in the move from

Msiha. It must have been, as Jim told himself smilingly, poor Coward's ewe-elephant. No other, even if it were carved in pure gold, could ever replace it.

One morning, when the spectacled Garth was peering, with an expression of intense disgust on his face, into Jim's bandages, Martock came hurrying back to them. From a rise in the ground in front he had sighted the rail-head: Korogwe station. A white hospital train was actually standing at the platform.

"It's a bit of astounding good luck for us," he told Garth. "Just drop Redlake's dressing and push on as fast as you can."

Jim was happy to be spared this gratuitous torture in any case, for Garth, with the best of intentions, was short-sighted and not deft-handed. As the convoy moved on with an exhilarating but distressing speed, he imagined comfortable bunks and cool white sheets, and the swift smooth progress of the train over iron rails which, surely, would be heaven after the plungings of the ambulance. They came to a stop at a point where, raising himself on his elbow, he could see the railway. The sight of it filled him with pride. If anyone in the world had a right to use that railway it was surely himself as a member of the First Brigade by whose blood it had been bought. The ambulance stood motionless for one hour, and then another. "They're taking a devil of a time over this business," he thought. Then, suddenly, he heard the hoot of an engine, and, a moment later, saw the white snake of the hospital train writhe cautiously up the valley and out of sight. Martock came to the tail of the ambulance, his face pale with fury.

"What's all this about?" Jim asked him. "Couldn't you stop them?"

Then Martock went mad. Jim could never have believed that his friend was capable of such violence. He stammered with rage. He and Garth had been down to the platform; had had speech with the officer commanding the train and explained their case: five officers and thirty "other ranks" seriously wounded.

"I suppose they were full up," Jim said, resignedly.

"Full up? They were pretty well empty. The O.C. train was a decent fellow enough and ready to take the lot of us. Then that swine X. . . . comes blustering up. 'What's all this about? A convoy of wounded? How long will it take to load them? An hour? Quite impossible. I've been urgently called to Nairobi. We can't wait. Go ahead!' *Nairobi!*" Martock almost screamed. "As if there were anything more urgent in Nairobi than a four at bridge!"

"Well, what did you do?"

"I told the swine just what I thought of him. 'D'you know who you're speaking to?' His face was as black as his tabs. 'Yes, I know whom I am speaking to,' I said, 'and I shan't forget it. I shall send in a report on this to G.H.Q.' I was ready at that moment for him to put me under arrest. 'If you were a regular officer, Captain Martock,' he said. . . . 'But I'm not, thank God!' I told him. 'I'm a temporary officer, and my contract's up at this moment.' That rather queered his pitch. These administrative blighters are scared blue by anything outside their damned little rule-books. But he had the whip-hand of me, and knew it. Turned his back on me, and then let fly at the miserable R.T.O. 'What are you standing here for, Mr. . . .!' Oh, I forget the chap's name. 'I gave orders for the train to start at noon, and it's now two minutes past!' The poor devil couldn't say anything to that. Old X. . . . just jumped in and slammed the door behind him. No doubt, at this moment, he's having a nice little friendly cup of tea with the sister-in-charge. But by God, when *I* get to Nairobi!"

That evening they left Korogwe in a hastily collected train of iron-trucks—N.B.X.'s, they called them—discarded rolling-stock of some metre-gauge Indian railway. The thin iron sheeting, heated by by day to the warmth of an oven, contracted at night with loud metallic cracklings. The trucks had been used for hurrying to the front those remounts that a few weeks later would strew the bush as "Brits' Violets." The floors were mercifully padded with a thick, ammoniacal compost of horse and mule-droppings. The odour was not unpleasant, and the bedding divinely soft. After the cramped confinement of the ambulance Jim found it a heavenly luxury to be able to stretch his unwounded limbs. Martock travelled with him, attending, as best he could, to the suppurating wound. He looked grave, Jim thought, as he went about it; but Martock was not at that moment a cheery companion in any case. His forehead was knit, his eyes dark and brooding, as he chewed the cud of the indignation with which his interview with the Medical High Command still filled him.

And Jim's thoughts too, when the pain in his knee allowed him to think, were far away from the dung-covered N.B.X. which carried him northward. This country, through which the engine dragged them with monstrous snortings that sprayed the black, tropical night with flying wood-sparks, was the scene, more or less, of the great march down the Pangani. For Jim it was inhabited—not by wandering herds and beasts of prey which had stolen back timidly to the haunts from which the invasion had driven them—but by the ghosts of the seven hundred Kalaharis, the doomed and fearless, who had stepped out so gaily along that same track only three months before. As he thought of the rapture and splendour of those first days, Jim felt more like a ghost himself than a living man. "The spearhead of the invasion": that was what Sheppard had called them. Now the metal of that spearhead, not bent nor broken, but rather dissolved into the ultimate molecules and atoms of its matter, could pierce no further. At that very moment, in G.H.Q. at Morogoro, a sergeant of the Signal Corps was tapping out a message that wire and cable would carry to the heart of the webs in Whitehall—a message from the Commander in Chief imploring the War Office for reinforcements:

"*In view of the First Division report that the Second Kalahari Regiment has ceased to exist* . . . the message began.

The cool white sheets of his vision awaited him three nights later—not only sheets, but clean clothes uninhabited by the lice whose promenades had not made life easier, and the amazing sight of women—white women!—and the sound of their voices. Yet a knee-joint in such a state as Jim's had reached, in spite of Martock's care, would not improve with keeping in a field hospital, nor could Martock's thinned blood throw off its poison save in highland air. "Nairobi for you two," they were told laconically; and shivering with the morning chill and breathless from the swift change of altitude, they parted, a little later, on the Nairobi platform: Jim bound for the British General Hospital and Martock for a convalescent home.

Jim felt, for the moment, entirely disorientated and lonely. In the ward where they put him he was the only officer who had taken part in the later movements of the invasion. The names which had become the commonplaces of his thought and speech—Msiha, Makindu, the Wami—meant nothing at all to the people who now surrounded him. They treated him as a casual visitor from another world, but entirely without curiosity; and his mind, still on fire with memories of the exploits in which his own part, if not actually heroic, made at least an enthralling story, was damped by their wilful ignorance and unconcern. To them he was no more than a casualty from the front: a fabulous region now more than five hundred miles away from their pleasant station. The details of the campaign didn't even interest them; they knew nothing about it; were merely irritated that it hadn't yet come to an end.

"You've made a fine mess of this knee of yours," the surgical specialist told him, with a severity that suggested that Jim himself was responsible.

"If you knew what they had to put up with!" Jim rose in indignant defence of the men in the medical service at the front. But the specialist, denizen of an easy world in which dressings and surgical appliances apparently grew on trees, neither knew nor cared.

"Send this officer along to the theatre to-morrow morning, sister," was all that he said with depressing gloom.

"I say . . . I'm not going to lose the leg, am I?" Jim anxiously asked.

"That remains to be seen. You won't lose it if we can save it."

Three times, in the first week, they carried Jim into the theatre; three times he surrendered himself to the sweet, stinging oblivion of chloroform, awakening each time to wonder if his leg was still there and to move his toes to assure himself that it was. Two weeks passed before the surgeon chose to commit himself.

"I think you'll be all right now," he said, with a grisly smile. "We've cleared up the débris. Nothing else to be done. That means, of course, that you'll have a stiff leg and a certain amount of shortening. You're lucky to get off so lightly."

Martock agreed. "I felt damnably anxious all the way up," he told Jim. "This fellow here's made a good job of you. You ought to be thankful. You're looking extraordinarily fit, when all's said and done."

Jim couldn't return the compliment. Poor Martock was shrunk to a shadow. Away from the front, he felt as disorientated as Jim; not because he wanted to be back there—Heaven forbid!—but because his life had been so long and so intimately associated with that of the brigade that existence away from it seemed somehow unreal and incomplete. They felt happiest, both of them, in the hours that they spent together in Jim's ward talking over old times, old names, old places, eagerly exchanging the flimsiest rumours that reached them from the ever-advancing front.

The pessimism that springs like a miasma from the stagnant life of a base invaded their minds. As long as the brigade had been advancing, and they with it, it had seemed to them that all was well with the war, not only in German East, but over the whole wide world. In Nairobi, with newspapers printed daily, and a steady drift of back numbers arriving from Capetown, the unutterable weariness of the struggle in Europe reached them. They realized, for the first time, that whatever happened in Africa, whether Smuts enveloped von Lettow or the Germans escaped, as they seemed to do, time after time, the result of the war depended on the Western Front. And the news from the Western Front grew darker and darker. Jutland, it seemed, had not been the crushing victory they had imagined. The Battle of the Somme, which the Intelligence's snippets of news at Msiha had represented as a signal victory, now appeared in its proper blackness. Martock brought to Jim's bedside files of old newspapers which he read with a sinking heart. The huge slaughter of the Somme appalled him: the casualties of its first day alone made the losses of that side-show which had been the whole war to him seem insignificant. Jim waded through the lists steadily, amid the meaningless hecatombs pulled up short, from time to time, by names that brought piercing visions of faces that he had known at Winchester, gay laughter, glad voices—all silenced: his own generation melting away like untimely snow. It was painful to prolong this bitterness, yet he compelled himself to read on and on, till suddenly, among a list of the killed, one name obliterated all others. It was Julian's. The long string of initials made it unmistakable. *Capt. J. C. L. Hinton . . .*

For a moment his heart stopped beating. Then hope fluttered feebly. A coincidence of initials? The odds were a million to one against it. Such hopes, he supposed, must have tortured thousands of people. Julian . . . killed! And the mood of stunned awe gave way to another of overwhelming tenderness in which visions of the living Julian crowded one on another: the Julian of their first meeting, clothed in the aloofness of his seniority, accosting him at Winchester, his beautiful voice demanding, "Your name's Redlake, isn't it? Are you any relation?"; Julian striding to the wicket over the green sward at Eton, so proudly unconscious of his own rare physical distinction; Julian reading Swinburne aloud, his dark eyes on fire, with summer gilding the grey cathedral stones and slow trout rising down the long glides at Itchen; then Julian in London, so smoothly, urbanly apt to the Berkely Square house with its patina of perfect culture; Julian sitting at the piano in the jade-green drawing-room at Thorpe Castle, inspired, playing Tristan for Lucy . . .

That scene, the last and most poignant, brought with it another vision: of Cynthia—his Cynthia then!—erect and slim before the fire she had kindled, her nakedness lit by a misty halo of gold. Cynthia . . . The thought of that scene brought back to him the pain and ecstacy of a rich, strange moment. Julian had played the love-music of the second act, the murmur of the fountain, the echo of hunting-horns. Now, as he stared unconsciously at the casualty list in his hands, the music that stole into his mind was that of the third act, with the sorrow of the sea and Tristan dying on the cliffs of Kareol. Jim found it difficult to think of Julian as dead. His old friend was too fine, too brilliant, too vivid to suffer this rude extinction. He accused himself now for the bitterness he had nursed against Julian's imaginary betrayal. Even the pain of his wounded pride, which still pricked him, in spite of himself, when he thought of Cynthia, seemed softened by this calamity; for Cynthia's loss, he imagined, must be bitterer even than his own. His heart bled for her as he thought of it. He did not realize that his mourning was not so much for Julian as for his own lost youth.

Indeed, when the first shock was over, he found himself thinking more often of Cynthia than of the vanished Julian. Night after night he dreamed of her. The phantom of Cynthia haunted him persistently, as if it were she, not Julian who had been killed; and this phantom was neither that of Julian's bride, nor of his desolate widow, nor even of the girl who had used Jim himself so cruelly, but always of the fierily-misted figure of the jade-green drawing-room at Thorpe. Though at night he was helpless, by day he succeeded in driving this vision away from him. The obsession put him to shame; for were not his body and soul both pledged to Catherine Malthus?

He forced himself, with all the conscious will at his command, to think of Catherine; yet the image of Catherine which he summoned out of the distance was faint and blurred compared with that of Cynthia which came without summons, clear-cut as the Oread Echo on her vase. It seemed as if only the actual Catherine could save him from this sense of humiliating disloyalty. Her image—and God knew he loved her no less devotedly—seemed to need some material reinforcement to make itself clear. He had a feeling that even a letter from her would have helped him; but the letters which she must surely have written in reply to his were now pursuing their halting way southward in the rear of the Kalaharis.

By this time, naturally enough the excitement that had sustained Jim so far in spite of his exhausting wound was beginning to fail. In the hospital at Nairobi day followed day with a deadly monotony, and the gloom of his spirit, in this period of reaction, was deepened by the feeling of heaviness and suspense which brooded over that high plateau on the eve of the lesser rains. The very air had lost its bright, stimulant clarity; now, tense with imprisoned thunder, it drained his vitality instead of supporting it. No prospect could have been more melancholy than those dun plains, sad as a sullen sea, over which, as each day advanced, great heads of sulphurous cloud uplifted laid siege to the earth in an imminent panoply of aching impotence as painful as his own. He rebelled against the arbitrary medical decree that kept him a prisoner at Nairobi. If his wound was not healed, he was able to walk on crutches. Why didn't they pack him off south to Durban, where Mark had been sent and Catherine awaited him? He thirsted for her cool presence, her warm lips, to set his mind to rights and making him himself again.

The explanation of this inactivity, according to Martock, was simple. The only hospital ship on the coast, the German *Ebani*, was now busy evacuating the broken South Africans from the new base at Dar-es-Salaam. Nairobi, no longer important, must wait its turn. At the moment Martock himself was in no better case than Jim. He was waiting impatiently for the relief from Europe whose arrival would free his hands and allow him to do his duty in making a full exposure of the medical breakdown. Though friendly as ever, they played on each other's nerves.

So the rains broke at last and the dun plain quickened. Christmas came: the most gloomy Christmas of all Jim's life. In the middle of January a sudden order arrived. The *Ebani* was at Mombasa and ready to sail at short notice. Martock burst in on him like a whirlwind. He, too, was sailing. In a frenzy of haste he gave Jim a hand with his packing and drove down with him to the station on the box of the ambulance in which they insisted on placing him. It was a marvellous journey for both of them, full of high spirits and hope.

"Poor old Furnival," Jim thought, "how he hated the sight of Msiha! If he'd been stuck at Nairobi, he'd have hated it even worse."

But Furnival, had Jim but known it, had finished with all loves and hates . . .

In Mombasa the Commander of an India Ambulance section received them, a charming and capable fellow, full of good-will and energy. It seemed that they were not expected; no word of their departure from Nairobi had yet reached Mombasa—"Though there's nothing unusual in that," he said rather bitterly.

"We have orders to join the *Embani*," Martock explained.

"The *Embani*? My dear fellow, the *Embani* sailed south half an hour ago."

"But that's monstrous," Martock protested. "We can't stay here in Mombasa. And I've no intention of returning to Nairobi," he added. "My contract is finished. Is there no other ship going south, sir? I can look after Redlake."

The I.M.S. Major shook his head. "I'm afraid that's no go. Of course I can't keep you here. Mombasa's no place for a surgical convalescent."

His face suddenly lightened as he caught sight of the badge on Jim's helmet. "Why, you're *not* a South African!" he said. "You belong to the British army; you've only been attached to the Kalaharis. And you're the same, Martock, of course. That simplifies everything. There's a ship coming in from the south this evening with frozen meat for Salonika. They've sent her this way to avoid the Western Mediterranean. A passenger steamer too, the *Desna*, R.M.S.P. She's calling in here to take the remains of the Loyal North Lancs on to Egypt. I can put you aboard her: you'll get home much sooner that way. It's a splendid idea. I've been wanting a medical officer for her in any case. Can you manage it, Martock?"

"Of course." Martock agreed with enthusiasm, though Jim's heart was sinking.

"Is there no other chance of South Africa?" he pleaded.

"No earthly. All possible ships are going to Dar-es-Salaam. As a matter of fact you fellows have all the luck. I wish to God I had a chance of getting home like this."

"All my friends are down south, sir," Jim said.

"I daresay. But—damn it all, Redlake—you're English aren't you?"

He called to his clerk. In a few moments their orders were made out. And orders were orders, anyway, Jim thought: the cogs of the machine had gripped him, and he must go. In war, after all, he supposed, no man's body was his own, and this particular piece of irony that side-switched him to England, round a third of a continent, at the moment when he believed himself to be on his way to Durban, was exactly comparable with that other caprice which had sent him to Durban on the *Balmoral* instead of to England. That blessed freak of fate had given him Catherine. This other carried him away from her. Fate's ways were inscrutable. It was no use protesting now. He could only submit.

"In any case," Martock consoled him, "you certainly wouldn't have stayed in Durban for long. All British officers are sent to Wynberg, near Capetown, on their way to England. This only means that you'll get home a little sooner. If you write out a cable for your girl I'll see that it goes."

The *Desna*, with Jim and Martock and all that was left of the Loyal North Lancs, sailed north that evening. The green coast grew dim, then faded into opaline cloud, to a thickening of the horizon that one could hardly believe to be land.

"We'll drink to the last of Africa!" said Martock cheerfully, handing him a whiskey and soda. "It won't hurt you," he said.

Jim sipped the liquor grimly.

"I need it," he thought.

Night fell like a swift curtain, as dark as the black map.

BOOK FIVE

ENGLAND, MY OWN!

I. *England, My Own!*

MISS MINNET was becoming extremely unhappy about the war. It wasn't merely the gigantic casualty lists that troubled her. Though, in the first years, she had waded through them religiously and sighed at the terrible loss that they represented, she hardly looked at them now. For her, as for others, mutilation and death had become matters of course. Nor was it her own privations, symbolized by the ration-cards which she kept, with a certain pride, displayed on the drawing-room mantelpiece. She had always been, she was forced to confess, a very small eater, being largely dependent for her sustenance on bread and butter and tea. It was not even the harrowing sight of wounded officers who hobbled out from the Castle gates with their blue arm-bands, and whom she admired so much, though she had never yet dared to speak to one even when he smiled at her. No, the thing that troubled Miss Minnet about the war—the last crusade, as Mr. Jewell had called it—was an awful sensation of being out of it.

Of course, in the early days, she had had her knitting. That gave one a wonderful sense of usefulness. But that sort of thing was so highly organized nowadays and so impersonal; the socks which you knitted were just swallowed up in a big machine. What was more, it was difficult now to get wool in Thorpe Folville. And the price of it! Well, really . . . But then, the price of everything! What with coal and margarine and potatoes—scarce as they were—there really seemed nothing left over to buy your wool with. Of course, as someone had said, the British Red Cross would supply you with free wool to knit with, if you chose to apply for it; but the head of the British Red Cross in Thorpe Folville was Mrs. Jewell, and the mere thought of the scorn on Mrs. Jewell's lips at such a request was enough to deter Miss Minnet from daring to make it. There was also, of course, a Society in Aid of Distressed Gentlewomen; but Miss Minnet, though extremely distressed, had never been regarded by Mrs. Jewell, or even by herself, as a gentlewoman.

As it was, Mrs. Jewell, who collected the socks and mittens and Balaclava helmets, always treated Miss Minnet's contributions as if they were dirt; she had even made scornful comments on two dropped stitches, just like a schoolmistress. If you tried to economize in lamp-oil, as people said you must for the sake of the navy, and one pair of your spectacles was cracked and the other lost, how *could* you help dropping one little stitch now and then? She would never, never forget Mrs. Jewell's last visit to Rose Cottage, rampaging in to dress her down about the new girl's making eyes at the officers. She had actually been mean enough to rake up the shameful episode of Edith's baby, poor little mite!

"I trust we are not going to have a repetition of *that*," Mrs. Jewell had said. "I suppose you realize that your house has a bad reputation already." Miss Minnet had merely gasped, though her blood was boiling. "I hold you responsible if anything happens," Mrs. Jewell had said, "and so will the Rector. Remember, Miss Minnet, at this moment you are Our Organist."

At this moment? The hidden threat had made Miss Minnet go pale. If they took away the key of the church from her, life would be empty indeed. The organ-bench was the one place in the world where you could forget your troubles. Seated there, all alone with Our Lord, with your fingers wandering idly over the ivory keys (and such good exercise for the leg-muscles) you could lose yourself in a sort of religious ecstacy, feeling just like that lovely picture of—who was it?—Saint Cecilia. As Mrs. Jewell glared at her with that great red face, those accusing eyes, Miss Minnet's conscience had smitten her. Just once—*only* once—when she had been feeling terribly depressed at the news of poor Mr. Holly's being invalided to Cairo with hæmorrhoids, she had fallen into the temptation of forgetting where she was and playing a piece of music that wasn't exactly sacred: to be precise, the Blue Danube Waltz. Her fingers had slipped into it, as you might say, by accident, and the sound had so carried her away that its enormity had not struck her until her eyes encountered those of Saint John the Divine in the chancel window, at which she had slipped out of it again, by an exceedingly tactful modulation, into one of the Communion hymns.

Was it possible, her guilt had suggested, that Mrs. Jewell had been on the "prowl" at the time, had heard her, and stored up this awful secret as an instrument for future torture? At that moment, at least, she had held her hand. She had begun "prowling," as was her wont, about the drawing-room; examining the ration-cards (those were all right, thank Heaven!) and looking into corners, as though she expected to find hoards of butter and sugar. Then, suddenly, she had turned on Miss Minnet, and said, "*Haven't you got any photographs?*"

These terrible, if cryptic, words had gone straight to Miss Minnet's heart. She knew what they meant precisely, and was filled with the most acute shame. She knew that Rose Cottage was, at that moment, the only house in the district in which the photographs of relatives in uniform were not prominently displayed on the piano. To begin with, she hadn't a piano—that was partly why the organ was so precious to her—but also, alas, she possessed no photographs, because, unfortunately, she had no male relative serving in the war. No wonder that Mrs. Jewell, with no less than two brigadiers on her Chappel and Chappel, to say nothing of a Rear-Admiral, surveyed her nakedness with scorn. It proved to Miss Minnet not only what she had known already—that the war was the private affair of Mrs. Jewell and her caste—but also that she, Miss Minnet, for all her knitting, was thoroughly "out of it." If only it had occurred to her, she thought regretfully, she might have saved her face by buying a photograph of Lord Kitchener or General Joffre. But that, after all, would hardly have been the same thing. As it was, when Mrs. Jewell had left her, she felt she had shown herself little better than a pro-German. Something must be done about it.

Not even, she thought, a photograph of the dear doctor's Ernest, who was "doing his bit" in the Remounts—not even one of her darling Elizabeth's Jim, her boy, as she liked to think of him! Yes, that was the thing! Though she doubted if Jim would really count, by Mrs. Jewell's standards (in East Africa, Mrs. Jewell had said, there was no real fighting—and thank God there wasn't!) still he did, in a way, belong to her: he was her heir. Only six months before she had had her will made—not by Margaret's husband, that horrible sneaky Withers, but by a real family lawyer in Leicester whom she had visited on purpose. That, surely, was enough to entitle her to Jim's photograph; so she decided to write to him at once and ask for one.

Where? That was the question. In spite of the fact that she had written to him regularly and found a great joy in expressing her inmost feelings about private matters—Mrs. Jewell's rampaging, for instance—she hadn't had a ghost of a reply for more than eight months. Perhaps he was too busy to answer her. Perhaps . . . Oh no, that wouldn't even bear thinking of. The probability was that she had sent them to the wrong address. So Miss Minnet put on her bonnet—a bonnet, however fashions might change, was always ladylike—locked in Elsie, for fear of the officers, and set out down the village.

In the worn little seal-skin tippet which had belonged to her grandmother, Miss Minnet, with her dancing gait, looked like some small, furtive animal, darting shyly from one side of the road to the other when she felt that somebody might speak to her. And, indeed, Miss Minnet *was* shy—partly from the sense of unworthiness that Mrs. Jewell had implanted in her, and partly because, cold as it was—and March had come in that year like a ravening lion—she wasn't quite sure that Mrs. Jewell would approve her ostentation in wearing her fur in wartime when our brave boys were actually suffering from frost-bite at the front.

She was thankful—if that wasn't wicked—to know that a convoy of officers had come in to the Castle that morning and that Mrs. Jewell would probably be busy at that moment explaining the hospital rules to them. Still, it was a relief to get out of the danger zone, its limit represented by the ugly stone block of The Grange where the new doctor's name had replaced the worn plate of Jim's grandfather.

She sighed as she passed it, reflecting on the change for the worse. Since Dr. Weston's death she hadn't, thank goodness, required a medical attendant; but if she ever were to fall ill she honestly didn't know what she would do. The new doctor was an elderly man, sixty-eight or sixty-nine, and very well spoken of. But a bachelor! Supposing she had pneumonia, like poor Jim, and he had to examine her chest! Miss Minnet blushed as she scurried past. "I would rather die outright," she told herself fiercely as she turned into the Rossington Road.

Why, there, just as if it had been planned to carry on the train of her thoughts, stood the cottage to which Mrs. Weston had retired when the practice was sold. "All alone with that Eliza," she thought.

"How lonely the poor soul must be!" In spite of the dreadful way in which Mrs. Weston had behaved to Jim, Miss Minnet was not ungrateful for the benefits she had received at her hands; those tea-parties at The Grange were the only occasions on which she had had the pleasure of meeting distinguished people. There she was, sitting up in the window at the side of the birdcage, like a china doll: so terribly still and so white—not moving a muscle! "Shall I bow to her?" Miss Minnet's heart fluttered. "No, really I daren't. If I do she may not return it, and that would be dreadful! However shall I get past her?" she thought.

With extreme self-consciousness, Miss Minnet stole by on tiptoe. Out of the corner of her eye she was discreetly aware that the pallid, watchful figure of Mrs. Weston had not moved an inch. No doubt about it: the rumours she had heard and discounted because they proceeded from Mrs. Jewell were true. Mrs. Weston was "queer"—not exactly insane, but "queer." Now she knew why Elsie had said that the village girls all hurried past that window. Sitting there all day propped up like a corpse in a glass coffin, staring with those awful, cold eyes! Miss Minnet shivered . . .

Of course, she thought, there had always been something a little strange about Mrs. Weston, nothing hail-fellow-well-met about her, like the dear old doctor. A lady by birth, no doubt. But then the stories! That one about the doctor's nightshirt, always carefully folded on the pillow beside her. And her meanness! They said that she weighed Eliza's food to the drachm in the doctor's old surgery scales, and tramped miles, short of breath as she was, to collect rents from the graziers even if they were only a day overdue. That wasn't exactly ladylike anyway. What was more, it wasn't as if she couldn't afford to pay an agent to do it for her. Why, she couldn't spend a twentieth part of the income she got from her life-interest the way she lived. Just hoarding it up for Margaret, Miss Minnet supposed. Yes, Margaret. It was always Margaret and nothing but Margaret. And what was the use of it? Every penny would go straight into the pocket of that man Withers. If Margaret had had a child it would be quite different. A nice little baby like Lucy's . . .

Miss Minnet smiled. She always smiled when she thought of babies; and Lucy's, by all accounts, was the image of poor Mr. Holly. "How true the Bible is," Miss Minnet thought, as the nature of Mr. Holly's malady flashed into her mind. "To have emerods at Gaza! The very thing that God inflicted on the Philistines. It's probably—what is the word?—it's probably endemic. What a shame, I'm afraid they won't give him a wound stripe either." But as far as Mrs. Weston was concerned, people said, Lucy Holly might never have had a baby at all. The old lady had never visited Lucy since the child was born, much less helped her out with all the expense it entailed. And Rossington Vicarage such a big, inconvenient house, and girls going into munitions! Well—who could blame them, so long as they kept straight and didn't have war-babies? She shook her head as she thought of Edith's second.

"It's no good dwelling on things like that," Miss Minnet thought. "How quickly one walks in this cold March weather!" For there, its tall gable pushing up through the screen of bare beeches, stood Rossington Vicarage itself, and the square-towered church behind it. She paused and adjusted her tippet, standing in doubt. She could save a mile and a half each way—three times in all—if she got Jim's address from Lucy. Why not? At the drive gate she hesitated. The idea of meeting Lucy Holly frightened her, for when last she had seen her, just before the baby came, Lucy's manner to her had been offhand, patronizing, almost rude. She supposed it was the result of having been "taken up" by the "county" in Mr. Holly's absence—partly that and partly the baby. Anyway, she had seemed dreadfully different from the violet-eyed child to whom Miss Minnet had taught the Kings of Israel and Judah and the Capes and Headlands: North Foreland, South Foreland, Dungeness, Beachy Head, Selsea Bill. Very different, even, from the smart young lady who had smiled at her through her window, going past with dear Jim and Lord Folville and Lady Cynthia and that friend of Jim's whom Lady Cynthia had married and who was killed at the Battle of the Somme. Poor Lady Cynthia, so young and already a widow! What a pity that she hadn't had a baby before her husband was killed! If she'd had a baby, perhaps she wouldn't look so hard and cold and listless now—which reminded Miss Minnet that if she didn't pluck up her courage and ask for Lucy, it would probably be months before she saw Mr. Holly's baby, and she *did* want to see it so!

As she paused and shivered at the forbidding drive gate a miracle happened. A blowsy nursemaid appeared round the laurel hedge, rather grimly pushing a perambulator. Miss Minnet stood, nodding her head and smiling, in anticipatory joy.

"Taking baby for a walk, nurse?" she said with a fluttered voice.

"Yes, we're going a ta-ta," said the nurse, unenthusiastically.

"May I look at him?" Miss Minnet asked timidly.

"So long as you don't wake him. When he wakes he's the worst-tempered morsel as ever I come across."

Miss Minnet lifted the spotted veil as reverently as though it concealed the Holy Sacrament. The nurse, in a mixture of boredom and anxiety, went on sucking an acid-drop. As she gazed on the podgy face of the infant Miss Minnet's own withered features assumed the rapt ecstatic cast of an annunciata. She took off one of her darned gloves and touched its cheek with the tip of her finger. As she did so a shiver of pleasure ran through her whole body and tears flooded her smiling eyes. When he grows up, she thought, the sweet little darling will be a clergyman—perhaps a bishop. What a wonderful mystery birth was! She shook her head, always smiling, with her eyes pursed up, till the nurse, who had watched this inane gesture with contempt and was getting cold, abruptly switched back the veil into its place and pushed on the perambulator.

"Little sweet! Don't you wish he was yours?" said Miss Minnet, still smiling.

The nurse made a backward grimace of assent. In her heart she was thinking: "You silly sloppy old geezer, what do *you* know about babies? Don't I wish he was mine? I don't think! I'll take damned good care I don't get caught with one! No gooseberry bushes for *me*!"

Miss Minnet, her face still transfigured, walked on in the opposite direction. This encounter, of itself, was enough to relieve her tiredness. For she *was* tired—her legs weren't used to such a long walk; she rarely ventured out nowadays for fear of meeting somebody—and the thought of a nice cup of tea at the Malthuses' was comforting. Of course she felt rather shy of ringing the bell at Cold Orton Vicarage, particularly on so strange an errand, and yet she had hopes that Mr. Malthus would understand, and Mrs. Malthus was so different from Mrs. Jewell. In the past, she felt, she had rather misjudged Mr. Malthus, just because his evangelical brand of religion—no incense, no vestments—was so different from dear Mr. Holly's and her own. Yet, whatever Mr. Malthus's faith might be, only think of his works! The devotion he had shown, during the last two years, not only to his own parish but Mr. Holly's as well! A frail man, and terribly poor (*she* knew what that meant!) he was working from morning till night, walking miles and miles through the snow: not even a pony-trap! It would have been nice if someone could only have whispered to Lucy that while Mr. Malthus was doing her husband's work he ought to use theirs, though, of course, with his high ideals, Mr. Malthus might possibly have refused it. He was that sort of man. No, you couldn't help admiring him. And as for Mrs. Jewell's scornful suggestion that he ought to be in khaki! Why, wasn't it enough to have three sons in the war, and one lost his arm, they said, and that nice girl Catherine away in the wilds of Africa? Mrs. Jewell was a scandal, even to suggest such a thing!

Still hot with indignation against her persecutress, Miss Minnet became aware of the impacts of a swinging stride on the frost-bound road behind her. A man . . . an officer perhaps! A moment later, Mr. Malthus himself overhauled her. He was wearing a green-black overcoat tightly buttoned, and looked more like a bodiless straw-stuffed scarecrow than ever. Apparently not noticing who Miss Minnet was, he stalked straight past her, perfunctorily raising his hat.

"Mr. Malthus!" she cried. "Mr. Malthus!"

"Miss Minnet? Why, you're quite a stranger!"

But he didn't treat her as though she were one: that was the lovely thing about it. As he spoke, a charming smile revealed itself on his thin, cold-blistered lips, his frosty features. Yes, frosty was the word. His whole person looked fragile and brittly white, like snow or sugar. The work of two parishes, Miss Minnet thought, had aged him terribly. Most considerably he adapted his steps to her mincing gait.

"Well, now that you've got so far," he said, "you must have some tea."

"What a kind thought, Mr. Malthus," Miss Minnet said, concealing the fact that this was what she had presumed to count on. As he went on talking, so considerately, waiting for her replies just as though they were really worth listening to without condescension, Miss Minnet's ideas of Mr. Malthus, which before this—on purely liturgical grounds—had been critical, suffered a complete change.

Even Mr. Holly—to say nothing of Mr. Jewell—had always made her feel her position. Mr. Malthus, in his human simplicity, made her think of our Lord's disciples. (After all, she thought, did they really burn incense in the catacombs or reserve the Sacrament?) If he looked severe—and, of course, that was all in keeping with the ascetic type —when he spoke she found him gay, she might almost say childlike. Of such, she remembered guiltily, was the Kingdom of Heaven.

"Now come along in, I must tell my wife," Mr. Malthus was saying.

What an ice-house! Miss Minnet thought: just like the Early Christians! It was colder indoors than outside; and yet, she supposed, she ought really to take off her fur. It wouldn't be polite to suggest that one was needed, quite apart from the fact that sealskin looked rather grand. Yet how nice it was, too, to see how the hall was scattered with boys' school-caps and mufflers and racquets and rods and butterfly-nets, just as though the children of the family had never group up and dispersed. There was warmth in the very idea of this family life. And what could be warmer, Miss Minnet thought, than the welcome of Mrs. Malthus herself, alert as a bright-eyed bird? Such a lady, she thought, in spite of her chilblained fingers! What a gentle smile, what frank eyes! Of course she had aged, like her husband. Miss Minnet, although she was nearly sixty, continued to regard herself, particularly when clergymen were about, as a shy young person.

"Jim Redlake always used to talk so much about you, Miss Minnet," Mrs. Malthus was saying. Her smile, with that snowy hair, was like a gleam of sunshine in winter. "He's very dear to us, you know. Just like one of the family. You remember my daughters Cecilia and Agnes, don't you?" (Miss Minnet smiled. Such refined, quiet girls, she thought, no nonsense about them.) "Will you take milk in your tea?"

"Just a tiny drop, please," said Miss Minnet. Mrs. Jewell, she felt quite certain, would have called it cream. "You were speaking of Jim," she said. "I'm so anxious for news of him. It's more than six months since I've had any reply to my letters."

"Well, that's quite understandable." Mrs. Malthus consoled her. "The mails from East Africa are very irregular. A lot of them were lost when the *Arabia* was torpedoed, you know. Catherine saw him on his way through at Durban, and said he was looking splendid."

"I'm so thankful he isn't in France," Miss Minnet said. "There's no danger to speak of in East Africa, is there?" she added—then knew, by a faint smile on Mrs. Malthus's lips, that she had put her foot in it. Mark's arm! Oh, dear!

"Well, hardly that, you know," Mrs. Malthus was saying, "as we know to our cost. However," she went on briskly, "when Mark saw him last, at a place called Handeni, I think, he was safe and sound. Cecilia, do give Miss Minnet some bread and . . . margarine. She's eating nothing."

"No, really, thank you," Miss Minnet protested, flourishing a crumb, "I've had quite sufficient. I'm wondering, to tell you the truth, if I have Jim's right address," she added timidly.

"That's quite simple. Agnes will give it to you. She's our secretary. Why, what's happened to Agnes?"

"She saw the postman, mother. She's gone for the letters," Cecilia murmured.

"Mother, mother!" It was Agnes who burst into the room like a whirlwind. "Such a feast! One from Paul, one from Christopher, *two* from Catherine, and one from Jim Redlake!"

"Open Jim's for me first, darling. Miss Minnet wants his address. Get my glasses, Cecilia, dear."

"Why, it's got an Egyptian stamp, mother. How awfully curious!"

Mrs. Malthus smiled gently. "You must be mistaken. I'm sure that's from Mr. Holly."

"Why not open it, Agnes?" Mr. Malthus suggested.

"I know Jim's writing anyway," said Agnes, handing the letter to her mother.

"Yes, it's Jim; you're quite right, Agnes." She read through the letter quickly. The eager silence that surrounded her, Miss Minnet thought, showed how fond of him they were. She watched Mrs. Malthus's face grow suddenly serious. "Bad news," she thought, "Oh, whyever doesn't she speak?"

"He's been wounded, dangerously wounded," Mrs. Malthus said at last. "He's been in hospital at Alexandria; but he must be better now. 'By the time you get this,' he says, 'I shall be on my way home. I shall send you a wire as soon as I land in England.' So you won't want the African address after all," she smiled at Miss Minnet. "That's splendid, isn't it?"

Miss Minnet barely heard her. She was thinking: Wounded . . . dangerously wounded . . . but he must be better or they wouldn't send him to England. Poor, darling boy! I shall get my photograph as soon as he lands. With a wound-stripe, too! But now I must go away quickly. They have four other letters that they must be burning to read, though, of course, Mrs. Malthus was far too polite and lady-like to let her imagine that they were in any hurry. She rose nervously, hastily swallowing the crumb she had kept to protect herself from appearing to be greedy.

"I think I had better be getting home," she said, "before it grows dark." The faces of Agnes and Cecilia showed their thankfulness. "If you will let me know when Jim lands," she said, "I shall be more than grateful."

"Of course, Agnes will cycle over and tell you," Mr. Malthus assured her.

What nice people, Miss Minnet thought, what a real Christian family! Long after she had gone her heart warmed to the picture of them, all clustered round Mrs. Malthus reading the four letters aloud. Four letters, she thought, four letters, all of them from people who love them! What a wonderful thing it must be to have a large family like that, even when you can't possibly afford them! After all, she thought, we must count our blessings. And Jim's coming home, she thought: dear Elizabeth's Jim, my own boy! The warmth in her heart so transfused Miss Minnet's frail body that now, as she tripped through the dusk away from Cold Orton, and later when, seeking a vent for her hot emotion, she stole into the church and played her lonely *Nunc Dimittis*, she actually forgot to put on her sealskin tippet.

That evening, through the same dank dusk, the hospital ship *Letitia* entered the Bristol Channel with Jim and Martock aboard her. It was not the triumphal homecoming that either of them had imagined. A month before, in the company of the Loyal North Lancs, they had been dumped down at midnight on the quay at Suez in the middle of a Turkish bombing-raid. All night they had shivered in the sandy Egyptian darkness of the canal-side. Though the

Lancs had their orders to entrain for Cairo, there seemed to be no place in Egypt for either of them.

"You'd better go on and report at Alex," a bored transport officer told them.

But nobody, apparently, wanted them in Alexandria. The war on the Palestine front was as self-sufficient to those engaged in it as that in East Africa, and Jim and Martock, each nursing a modest consciousness of achievement, were regarded as unwelcome flotsam from a minor side-show less important than the Duke of Westminster's latest raid against the Senussi. The conquest of a territory considerably larger than Germany itself seemed a negligible matter to the first officer they encountered in the office of the Base Commandant at Alex.

"East Africa?" he said cheerfully. "How the devil did you get up here? That must be an interesting country. Did you get any shooting?"

"Yes, a little," said Martock ironically. "This fellow got shot through the knee-joint."

The officer looked Jim up and down incredulously, as though he still suspected that the wound was self-inflicted.

"You don't mean you're *wounded*?" he said. "Why, I thought the Huns had nothing but niggers against you. So you've actually had some fighting down there? I say, that's damned interesting."

"We're supposed to be going to England," Martock explained.

"Lucky devils! You know, I'm afraid I can't help you there. You're not on our strength, you see. You're nothing to do with us. As a matter of fact, if you're sick you should be in hospital."

"I'm not sick," Martock answered firmly. "My contract's up. I've just been relieved."

The officer shook his head helplessly. "Have a cigarette. They're Gippies unfortunately. This business needs thinking out, you know." He turned to Martock entreatingly. "You *have* been sick, haven't you? Beastly climate—tropical diseases—dysentery or something of that sort? Malaria? Why, my dear chap, that's the very thing! Staff-sergeant!" he called. "Look here, Staff-sergeant, these two officers have just rolled in from East Africa." The man looked as blank as if they'd rolled in from the pole. "Now, they're nothing to do with *us*, are they?"

"Nothing whatever, sir."

"Well. This is the idea. Better put 'em on our strength at once—say the rest-camp at Ramleh. When they get there all they need do is to report sick at once and get the M.O. in charge to send 'em to Ras-el-tin. How will that do? Hm?"

"I think that's in order, sir," the staff-sergeant gave his cautious opinion.

"There you are!" said the Major, triumphantly pleased with his own ingenuity. "It's extraordinarily interesting—I mean all this you've told me about East Africa. I thought that show was over ages ago. Or is it the Cameroons I was thinking of? Yes, that must be it. So long, and good luck to you. You won't stay here long. The harbour's stiff with all kinds of hospital-ships."

They might, Jim and Martock both thought, have pitched on a better sample of one than the *Letitia*: a Canadian cattle-boat (or so it was said) converted to carry Indian sick from Gallipoli. In her narrow tween-decks, which were fitted with swinging cots, a tin spittoon to each of them, there lay, like cattle indeed, more than two hundred British officers, the débris of the Gaza front and of Mesopotamia. Behind a thin bulkhead aft of this noisome chamber, to which the faint oriental odour of its former occupants still clung, an unhappy company of more than forty mental cases was segregated, including a naval V.C. from the Persian Gulf and an Indian Army general. Twice daily the less violent of these unhappy creatures were marched out to exercise, an orderly in charge of each of them, and the sight of these wild-eyed melancholy figures with their shattered brains was more terrible to Jim than all the carnage and mutilation of body that he had seen before.

In the stifling and foetid air of the *Letitia's* tween-decks, Jim and Martock felt more definitely "out of it" than ever. To their companions, as to the Major at Alexandria, East Africa was no more than a name. Their talk was of Kut and Basra, of the great arch of Ctesiphon and of Gaza.

As Jim listened to them he realized, for the first time, how huge, how incomprehensible a thing this great war was; how hard it must be for the man in the field to grasp the significance or perspective of anything beyond the small local movements in which he himself was concerned: the adventures of his own platoon or squadron, at the most of his division. To each group of men on that ship the war meant something entirely different.

This strange revelation carried with it another. The war in East Africa, by reason of its romantic isolation and the sense of adventurous brotherhood that arose from it, had a certain personal quality in which the individual was never quite submerged. Once aboard the *Letitia,* both Jim and Martock found that they had no more individuality left. As persons they had ceased to have the least validity; they counted no more than pieces of scrap-iron discarded from a worn engine and sent back to the factory to be thrown aside or welded and hammered into shape again. Their very names had been replaced by the numbers on their cots. Instead of men, with passions and dreams and aspirations of their own, they had become mere ticketed units in an impersonal machine. That impression, of a vast, unsympathetic impersonality, deepened day by day as the hospital-ship rolled northward through the Atlantic, cheating German submarines with the zig-zags of a frightened hare. It reached its nadir on a foggy morning, off Avonmouth, when they stood side by side at a port-hole gazing into the frigid mist that shrouded the England of their tropic dreams, invisible yet, but represented, for them, by a grimy launch that came hooting out of the fog with the arbiter of their immediate destiny, an irritable Territorial, on board her, and a sooty, bedraggled ensign drooping at her stern.

"The heroes' return!" said Martock sardonically. "England, my England!"

Jim smiled. The sun of the wounded hero had long since set.

A quartermaster of the R.A.M.C. came round with a notebook and a stub of pencil. Equal numbers of beds were available in London and at Bristol. Within these limits, officers could make their choice.

"For God's sake let's stick together," Jim said. He was tired, far more than he had thought possible, by the endless delays of their disembarkation, depressed by the unfriendly landfall, so different from all his dreams, and a warning shiver foretold an attack of fever. To avoid travelling further they chose Bristol; but when the lists were finally made out it appeared that Jim had been allotted to London.

"Can't you speak to someone about it?" Jim asked in alarm. The onset of fever had quickened the pain in his wound. He felt terribly defenceless and lonely. The thought of losing Martock bulked huge as a tragedy.

"I'm afraid it's no good, old fellow," said Martock grimly. "From this moment onward we have no more say in the matter than a couple of pigs on a moving platform in the Chicago stockyards. I'll write to you as soon as I know what they mean to do with me."

"I've a couple of wires to send."

"All right. I'll look after those."

There was one to his mother and one to the Malthuses. Martock took them both. A moment later he was gone.

It was merciful, perhaps, that the attack of fever deadened Jim's sensibility. As it was, in the train that whirled him eastward to London, through blue-misted, wintry fields, incredibly dun to eyes that were accustomed to tropical splendours, a landscape of bare boughs shivering, as he shivered, in the bitter wind that had made Miss Minnet put on her sealskin, the face of England seemed starved, tight-lipped, ungracious, far different from that of a mother welcoming her sons. What struck Jim more than all else was the scene's awful emptiness. For mile upon mile no human being was visible save, here and there, the strange apparitions of land-girls striding along in their cord breeches.

As he gazed on this scroll of desolation unwinding, Jim's thoughts flew back to Durban, where, but for a piece of fortuitous irony, he might well have been at this moment—to Durban, sun-drenched in its golden autumn, and Catherine that golden girl. "Five thousand miles: out of sight, out of mind!" he thought. "Does she think of me now?" For answer to this question there was nothing but a roaring of wheels, the roaring in his ears of the quinine which Martock had given him.

Outside London, in the thickening fog, the train pulled up for a mere couple of hours. Instead of the roaring wheels, in a quietude like that of a ship whose engines cease to throb as she drops her anchors, Jim heard a slow hiss of escaping steam, steps tramping the corridor, clear voices of men playing bridge in the next compartment.

"You put me right off," one said, "when you trumped his king."

"Well, I had to get in with my spades," another answered indignantly.

"All right, all right!"

"Please put out that light at once, sir."

"The light! What the devil . . .?"

"Zeppelins."

A raid! Jim thought. Well, isn't that like my luck? They always try to smash up the railways. What if they do? Pretty beastly though, lying here helpless, like the sick at Msiha when the naval guns got to work.

"I say, Joe, what price a Porterhouse steak at the Piccadilly?"

"Don't talk of it. What about a pint of draught-beer, my son?"

"And what about pukka white women? I never could fancy Levantines."

"Well, you couldn't be particular in Alex."

So many different Englands for different people, Jim thought.

"I'm going to sleep," said the first voice. "You can call me at Paddington. Good Lord, we're off again!"

With the snortings of a wounded animal the train crawled on into London. A middle-aged man in an unfamiliar uniform poked his head into Jim's compartment.

"Stretcher forward!" he shouted.

"Look here, I can walk," Jim protested.

"Well, you're marked as a stretcher-case," laughed the other, "so you'd better behave like one."

They bundled him out of the train and into an elegant ambulance, very different from those of Garth's convoy. Could this really be London, Jim wondered, this sombre, unlighted city? All around him he heard the stir of traffic, the tooting of motor horns. He was out in the dank air again on his stretcher. A spectacled woman bent over and glanced at his ticket.

"Ward three," she said shortly.

The voice was familiar. Where had he heard it before? Jim racked his aching brain. It was Madame Defarge of Wimpole Street. What fun for her, he thought, to find I'm a surgical case at last!

"Why, how hot you are! You must have a temperature," said a soft-voiced V.A.D. "I'll take it at once."

"Don't bother," Jim said, "I can tell you. It's a hundred and three. I've got malaria."

"But this is a surgical ward . . ."

"Yes, I'm wounded, too. I'd much rather you'd leave me alone, nurse."

"I shall have to tell sister."

"All right. I'm horribly cold."

"Poor dear! I'll get you a bottle at once."

The ward was drenched with a sweet, stinging smell of antiseptics. It was clean and quiet. How gently they moved, these English women! The man in the train had been right. What soft voices, too! Like doves in the tall spathodeas!

"I told you it would be a hundred and three," he said. "Now I'm going to sleep."

When Jim woke, a shaded electric light was shining beside his bed. He heard, once more, the voice of Madame Defarge:

"He's marked 'surgical.' G.S.W. knee, it says. But his temperature's up."

"Just show me the case-sheet, matron," a man's voice replied.

It was another familiar voice. Jim opened his eyes. The clean-shaven man in the white overall was Dr. Fosdyke.

"Redlake? James Redlake? How very curious!" he said.

II. *The Silver Cord*

WELL, of all the extraordinary coincidences!" everyone was saying. "And you put down your name for Bristol, Mr. Redlake, didn't you? That's what makes it so queer."

"I was sure that I'd seen you before when you came in on the stretcher," Madame Defarge maintained, "though, of course, I hadn't time to think it out. Some officers," she went on, with a tinge of her old gloating satisfaction in major surgery, "have been wounded as many as three times and come back to us, just by chance, again and again. But it's always nice to see the old faces, isn't it? Not that *you*'ll ever come here again," she added with a ghoulish smile. "They won't send *you* back to the front with a leg like that. Not they! At any rate, we can keep you until the sinus is healed. I only wish we'd had you two months ago. Colonel Fosdyke is a wonder with knees."

Colonel Fosdyke, as they called him now, was indeed the Prophet of God in the Matron's eyes. She proclaimed his virtues loudly, perpetually, and rather tactlessly, to the detriment of the other surgeons and the scandal of her staff. Yet, as soon as his fever cleared up and thought became possible, Jim was forced to agree with her. That grey man, with his heavy, clean-shaven face, his ponderous manner and his blunt, white fingers, so powerful and yet so deft, inspired more confidence in Jim than any surgeon he had yet encountered. Submitting to his care, Jim wondered what puzzling inhibition of adolescence had compelled him to the blind hatred and mistrust he had felt when they met before, such wisdom, such justice, such deep reserves of sureness and skill now shone in his quiet eyes. From the first he had treated Jim not merely as a stepson, the child of the woman he loved, but as a human being and a friend. As man to man they instinctively liked one another, discarding immediately those reserves of awkwardness which, on Jim's side, had turned their first meeting into such an ignoble fiasco. However possessive Colonel Fosdyke's feelings toward Jim's mother might be, it was clear from the first that no shadow of jealousy marred them.

"I shall bring her to see you to-morrow morning as soon as your dressing is finished," he told Jim on their unexpected encounter. "I'm sorry we can't give you a ward to yourself, but that can't be helped: our serious cases come first."

So, next day, in the tremulous, exalted state of his abating fever, which tinged the whole affair with dreamlike, unreal hues, Jim waited, within the cage of screens that had been set up for his dressing, for her arrival. What would she be like? he wondered. It was nearly five years since he had seen her, and the image that recurred to him whenever he had written to her or read her letters was arbitrarily fixed in his mind as that of the slim, girlish, pitiful figure with her hair down her back whom he had scourged with such thoughtless, boyish cruelty in that shabby lodging amid a faint scent of white lilac. Since then he could never think of her save as a gentle creature whom his selfishness had brutally wronged. Could she ever forgive that madness? he asked himself bitterly. Could they ever be quite the same to each other after that? In the gloom of these self-accusations he waited, doubtful and miserable, for a moment that something like shyness made almost unbearable. He lay listening, with an eagerness in which joy and dread were commingled, to each step that approached his screens, to each whisper of a voice that might possibly be hers. "If I heard her voice," he thought, "it's quite possible that I shouldn't know it."

Yet when, in fact, she entered the ward in Madame Defarge's company, the first quiet syllable she breathed set his heart fluttering like that of a boy in love.

"Over here on the right, Mrs. Fosdyke," the business-like voice of the Matron was saying. "He's an excellent patient. Slept steadily all through the night. (Oh, *did* I? Jim thought. That's all you know about it.) I only wish that the Colonel had had him in hand from the start. Inside these screens!" She brusquely parted them and smiled through at Jim. "I've brought you a present, Mr. Redlake," she said. "Just half an hour. Not a second longer; I've told sister to keep the time. Now I'll leave you to yourselves," she added, as though it were a concession, and pulled-to the screens behind her.

So this was she, Jim thought. Could it really be she, or were they playing some trick on him? This wasn't his mother! This wasn't the little girl in a petticoat with brown hair down her back! Her hair, indeed, was of a finely-spun silvery whiteness, though her figure was as slender and girlish as ever before, and her face, that went blurred as his eyes brimmed with tears, of the same soft innocence. She stood at the foot of the bed, for one moment motionless, as though she too found it difficult to believe that the lean, bronzed man lying there was really her son. Then, without a word—for his voice was no longer his own—Jim stretched out his arms to her, and a moment later, as though by some miracle independent of bodily will, she was crouching beside him, her fingers entwined in his, her soft face pressed close to his stubbly cheek, her unbidden tears commingled.

In his former life Jim had known moments of passion, of sweetness excruciating, yet never of a sweetness quite so tender as this. For a long while neither of them spoke nor even whispered; any speech had been impious; their reunion of body and spirit, mystically proclaimed by their mingled tears, transcended not only speech but any other physical expression. In that sacramental moment it was as though the lives of these two human beings, so long divided not only by space but by thought, had regained that identity of flesh in which they had once been united, re-established the one bond on earth that can never be broken.

As Jim lay there, his eyes lightly closed, in this strange heaven, dimly conscious of the perfume that had been always his mother's own like the perfume that is a flower's, her fingers untwined themselves from his; he was aware of them, soft as a moth's wings, drifting over his eyelids, his hair, his features, as though some mysterious tactile sense in them demanded the satisfaction of tracing the forms they loved; and the image of his mother, which he had conceived so often, faded from Jim's mind, to be replaced not by that vision of silver fragility whose appearance had startled him but by one older still. The years dissolved, his surroundings faded away from him; he was lying no more in that hospital ward in the middle of Bloomsbury, but in a dim little room on the second floor of The Dove's Nest; and the woman whose fingers, like moth's wings, vaguely caressed him, was the mother of those old days when they were alone together, finding refuge from the life that George Redlake had made so bitter, in the company of her little boy. Even faint echoes of a ritual of words came back to him:

"Do you love me, Jimmy—do you love me better than anyone?"

"I love you . . . oh, dreadfully, and because you're my darling mother."

"Are you my baby? Are you mother's own baby? Now kiss me good-night. No, kiss me properly."

But now she was actually speaking. "I didn't mean to cry, Jim. I'm ashamed of myself."

"So am I, my dearest," he told her. "I feel it's a dream."

Was it really a dream after all? If dream it was, it was shattered a moment later by the sound of a discreet cough and the sight of the sister's scrubbed red hand poking round the curtain.

"I'm afraid your half-hour is up," she firmly announced.

"All right, sister. Thank you." Jim mother's voice was a little unsteady. Yet how he loved it! That hadn't changed in the least. "Good-bye, my darling." She kissed him, slowly, softly. "I shall see you to-morrow. Good-bye." She excused herself to the sister, who still stood waiting, with a pretty timidity. "Do you know it's five years since I've seen my son?" she said. Then she turned again with a parting smile. How lovely she is, Jim thought, how utterly lovely she is!

When she had gone an intense calm descended on Jim. The wound which, unknown to him, had vexed his conscience ever since his parting with her in that shabby room behind Wimpole Street, pricking it with a vaguely realized sense of guilt and injustice whenever he had thought of her or written to her, had been healed. He felt like a traveller who, after long journeying, returns home at last. Even his impatience for Catherine seemed to be mitigated by the new, bland serenity which possessed him. Though he had learned, to his bitter cost, the meaning of love, he had never, in manhood, known the intimate friendship which his rediscovery of his mother offered him. "A boy's best friend is his mother," the cant phrase mocked him; cant or no, he was compelled to admit its truth in his case; there was no other living soul in the world but she to whom without hesitation, he could open the depths of his heart. There was nothing within it, he knew, that he could not reveal to her; the spiritual loneliness to which he had condemned himself was gone for ever.

Next day, since his fever had burned itself out, her visit was extended to an hour. A mild panic seized him when he saw that Dr. Fosdyke was with her, for he dreaded a return of the old, fierce jealousy. They stood for a moment together within his screens, Dr. Fosdyke's arm round her waist.

Jim knew by the glance with which she caressed her husband, half-admiring and half-protective, that she loved this man and had found her happiness with him. Yet now, thank heaven, he felt no pang of jealousy. There were different kinds of love, and that which she owed and gave to her husband detracted no more from her love of Jim than did Jim's devotion to Catherine from his for her. She had love enough and to spare for both of them. It was equally clear that Dr. Fosdyke rejoiced in her happiness. If Jim had misjudged her, he had misjudged this man even more.

"Now don't let him talk too much," he gravely said as he left them.

It was a counsel of perfection; they had so much to say to each other. Five years to make up! They hardly knew where to begin. Yet, strangely enough, it was not of those years that they spoke, but of far-off things—of their life at The Dove's Nest, of their flight to Thorpe Folville—extracting from those days of remote unhappiness a peculiar half-humorous pleasure, as though time, of itself, had taken the bitterness out of them and the memory of old pain, in their new security, had become an indulgence of luxury.

So that short hour passed, and another, and then another, till, though it still seemed as if they could never catch up with the past, they began to feel as if they had never been parted, to be certain that nothing could ever part them again. To Jim this rare relationship was almost bewilderingly sweet. With his mother, for the first time in his life, he was able to reveal himself, without any of the inhibitions of shame or passion, in the absolute certainty that he would be understood. For every confidence that he gave her she returned a frankness which reminded him, again and again, in its justice and charity, of his grandfather's. They spoke more like brother and sister than son and mother. In these long talks he learned, with an indignation as intense as it was futile, how the malignancy of Mrs. Weston had blighted his mother's childhood, how even that unhappiness had paled beside that of her life with George Redlake. Jim found it amazing that she could speak of both without rancour.

"You see, I'm so happy now, Jim," she told him, "with you and with Harry, that I feel I've no right to be bitter. As for mother

. . . well, you know, she was always a little queer. There's a strange strain in all the Delahays."

"Not in my cousin Walter. He's a man in a million. I only wish you'd met him."

And she listened breathlessly to the story of his coming to Trewern.

"We must go there together some day," she said. "I've often dreamed of it. Isn't it strange that, although your grandmother's treated us so badly, I always have a feeling that you and I are Delahays? I've wanted to see Trewern all my life, but your father would never let me; he couldn't bear to think that I had any interest outside him when once we were married. He's a strange man, Jim. I wonder if you're at all like him . . ."

"I hope to God I'm not!" he answered indignantly.

"I suppose he is a genius."

"I wonder. I used to think so. Now I'm not quite so sure."

"You know he was knighted last Christmas? This new Order of the British Empire. Only think of it," she smiled, "I might have been Lady Redlake—instead of . . ."

"I met her, just once—Mrs. Parrot, I mean," Jim told her. "I'd not heard of the honour. How pleased the Senator should be!"

"Oh, do tell me what she's like," his mother asked eagerly; and this quick curiosity on her part to know all about the woman who had supplanted her seemed to Jim a weakness that was no less adorable because it was so feminine. He described in detail his single visit to Clarges—the valet, the writing-table, the whole atmosphere of a literary shrine and Mrs. Parrot's rapt worship.

"Poor thing! She sounds rather nice," said his mother, dreamily.

"She *is* nice, you know: so expensive and yet so *naïve*."

"I feel terribly sorry for her, Jim."

"Well, she's Lady Redlake. My father will probably respect her money, anyway."

"And he wouldn't even look at your verses? What a shame! You must show them to me. Were they terribly modern, darling? What were they all about?"

He told her. To no other soul in the world had he ever admitted his passion for Cynthia. She listened, always gently smiling, as the tale poured from his lips; and as he told it her, to the last dregs of his humiliation and bitterness, it seemed as though a burden, whose unrealized load had weighed on him till that moment, had slipped from his spirit.

"You poor dear!" she was saying. "You must have been dreadfully hard hit."

"She was *so* lovely, mother. I simply can't tell you . . ."

"I've seen her photographs. I remember her mother, too. But I'm sure she never loved you, Jim. She just happened to be bored at Thorpe Folville."

"I suppose that was it. But, Lord, how she made me suffer!"

"You've quite got over it now, though?" She stroked his hair backward tenderly.

"Completely, thank Heaven!"

"And there's nobody else?"

"Oh, mother, how curious you are! Yes, there is someone else."

"I thought so. Why don't you tell me, Jim?"

And she listened again, gravely this time, making no comment. Her long silence, in the end, became disconcerting; it checked his story; he stopped.

"Why don't you say anything, mother?" he asked. "What's the matter?"

"I've been thinking, darling . . ."

"You mean that you don't believe . . . ?" he began, in protest.

"No, no, it's not that. Don't look so indignant, Jim."

"I can see that you don't. On my honour, mother, I worship her. No one could possibly . . ."

"Yes, I know. I'm not reasoning; it's just intuition. Shall I tell you the truth, Jim?"

"Well?"

"You'll probably be more indignant than ever. It's difficult to explain; but I feel, when you speak of Catherine, you're almost *too* reasonable."

"Of course I'm reasonable, mother! If only you knew her!"

"It's almost as if . . . as if you were trying to convince yourself as well as me that you're really in love with her. When you spoke of the other one—even when you spoke bitterly—your tone was quite different. Of course, I know that first love is a thing by itself, quite terribly devastating. When you told me how lovely she was . . ."

"My darling, I'm just as dispassionate as if I were speaking of a Tanagra statuette or a figure on a vase. *Can't* one love beauty in the abstract."

She smiled. "If you're a man, and your abstract beauty is a woman's, it's rather difficult." Then she changed that part of the subject abruptly. "The Hinton boy whom she married—is he your Winchester friend?"

"Yes. A wonderful fellow. I foolishly got out of touch with him. I felt so bitter about Cynthia. I've regretted it . . . awfully. You see he was killed on the Somme. That reminds me. I *must* see his father."

But a shade of alarm had flickered over her eyes.

"Then your Cynthia's a widow?"

"Yes. For Heaven's sake don't let's talk of her. I want to talk about Catherine. You like the Malthuses, don't you? You see, this is so different; we have such a lot in common—all those queer old days at Cold Orton—and then later, you know, when you never came down to Thorpe . . ."

"When I couldn't come, Jim," she reminded him.

"I'm not blaming you, mother darling. When I was all detached, so to speak, and hated by Gran, the Vicarage was like a home to me. There's something extraordinarily fine about all the Malthuses: you could cut microscopic sections and find them sound through and through. I'm not so consistent as that, you know."

She smiled at his earnestness. "I don't want you to be too consistent."

So, day after day, they talked, and the days became weeks. Jim's obstinate sinus showed signs of healing. He was putting on flesh, and looked very different now from the coppery starveling whom at first she had hardly recognised.

"This fellow wants exercise," Colonel Fosdyke told her. So they fitted him up with a Thomas's knee-splint that took the weight of the leg from the hip. He was encouraged to walk, and every day, with his blue armlet on, he went out into London with his mother. It was only when they stood side by side again that he realized how little she had always been and how much he had grown. As they walked together, smiling like lovers, nobody took any notice of them; the sight of wounded officers had become a commonplace in those days. Drifting gaily through the squares and parks, with her arm in his, they were as much alone with each other as if London had been Africa.

To Jim, indeed, it was more like heaven. He had never before felt so serenely happy as now. Even in the first eager days at Schoengesicht, when his mind and body had been absorbed in adjusting himself to that new life, his alienation from his mother had weighed on his conscience. Now that heaviness was lifted; they were nearer than ever before; so complete in each other that not even the shadow of war, that brooded over England, could touch them. Unconscious of any selfishness he began to rejoice that, for himself at least, the war was over. The resilient hope of that London spring, whose soft skies and bursting buds took no count of men's sorrows, sharpened this sense of relief. Its temperate air began to sweeten his blood; his unharassed mind became, with each day of convalescence, more sensitive to all its beauty. The very memory of the horror he had suffered in Africa enhanced his reward.

He began to rediscover England. Hitherto he had deliberately forced himself to forget how much he loved her. Now her trees, her flowers, the very smell of her streets enchanted him. The hot bewitchment of Africa slackened its hold upon his imagination. Though this war-burdened land was different from the England he had left so gladly, he was moved perpetually by the stability, the fortitude, the essential soundness of his own people: those qualities for which Cold Orton Vicarage stood as a type. His mother and he spoke much of the Malthuses in these days; for now, every fortnight at least, a letter came through from Catherine. Mark's firm had treated him generously; his job was still open; but before he resumed it they had offered to send him to England on six months' holiday, and Catherine, naturally, would come with him.

"When you see her," he told his mother exultantly, "you'll understand why I keep on raving about her like this."

She smiled: "The more you rave the happier I am. If you both feel alike," she said. "I think you'd much better get married as soon as possible . . . that is, if you can afford it."

"Oh, we shall afford it all right. I can trust cousin Walter for that. There's always Schoengesicht."

"That means I shall lose you again, Jim," she murmured sadly.

"No, you'll never lose me again, mother dear," he assured her.

"Let's make the most of it anyway," she smiled again.

In this new lease of life, with the ravishing prospect of Catherine's return in front of him, Jim was only too eager to make the most of everything. Though he and his mother were always together—for, thanks to Fosdyke, the hospital discipline was discreetly relaxed in his case—it seemed almost impossible to catch up with the past, to pick up the threads of the life which he had led apart from her and now longed for her to share. She rose to his enthusiasms with an amazingly youthful quickness. It was with the adventurous spirit of two children that they set out together for Lupus Street, Jim limping at her side. She gasped as they entered it, staring at the grimy front of the "other side."

"What a terribly sordid place, Jim! Did you really enjoy it?"

He laughed at her. "It never seemed sordid to me. I was happy here, in a way. And I loved the people in the house. Such a curious collection. Here we are, number thirty-nine."

In the window of Starling's ground-floor front a fly-blown *"Apartments"* notice hung upside down. Jim rang the tarnished bell-pull, expecting a moment later to see the Major appear in his singlet. A bedraggled servant opened it and stared at them idiotically.

"May I see Mrs. Pooley?" he asked.

"Mrs. Pooley! Mrs. Pooley!" she screamed. "There's a soldier come."

"What is it? What is it?" an irritable voice replied. "No need for shouting now!"

Mrs. Pooley emerged heavily from the basement stairs, wiping her hands on a dirty apron. She had little of the bustling energy that Jim remembered; her face was shrivelled and drawn and covered with blotches. She shook her head firmly before she had even looked at them.

"It's no good. I can't take in no married couples," she said. "Not even if you *are* married. The girl only comes in Thursdays and half-witted at that, and I've an invalid lady upstairs that takes all my time. You'd better try number forty."

"Mrs. Pooley, surely you remember me?"

"I've no time to remember folk. There's so many gentlemen come and gone one time and another. But I can't take you in, sir, so it's no use standing here arguing."

"My name's Redlake. Surely you remember . . . I bet you the Major would have known me, Mrs. Pooley."

The mention of the Major's name had a talismanic effect on Mrs. Pooley.

"Redlake? Redlake? Are you Mr. Redlake. Why, medical, wasn't you? You'd better step in, sir," she said, and cautiously opened the door of the room that had once been Starling's. Its details of furniture had been rearranged for Mrs. Pooley's taste if not for her occupation. Over the mantelpiece, surrounded by a smiling galaxy of Miss Moger's surplus theatrical beauties, a bromide print of the Major, enlarged to considerably more than life-size, puffed out a medalled chest and glared above the skewer of his moustaches, like a pasha posed in the midst of his harem.

"There he is, poor soul!" Mrs. Pooley pointed proudly. "Called up on the fifth of August, Nineteen fourteen, to do his bit as the saying is."

"I'm terribly sorry to hear this, Mrs. Pooley," Jim began.

"*And* been doing of it ever since," Mrs. Pooley went on cheerfully, "teaching gentlemen to stab with the bayonet in the Hinns of Court. It's heavy work for a man of sixty, sir, bayonetting of them stuffed Germans. The Major's no longer the fine figure of a man you see there, sir, don't make no mistake."

"This room used to be Mr. Starling's," Jim said. "You remember *him*, I suppose?"

"I should think I do, sir," Mrs. Pooley answered vindictively. "Don't mention him! That Starling, he give us more trouble than anyone would credit. It's not like this house to have the policeman coming and asking after people. The pro-Boer we always called him. What he done I don't know, and no more does the Major; but Miss Moger, she has the idea he's somehow mixed up with the German submarines."

"So Miss Moger's still with you?"

Mrs. Pooley shook her head and sighed heavily. As she did so all three of them looked up with a sudden start at the sound of some heavy object determinedly pounding on the floor above.

"That's *'er,*" Mrs. Pooley said darkly. "At it again! We shan't have no peace unless I answer her. She's that inquisitive these days that there's no stopping her. On she goes, till you come! And you can't put her off. That's the worst of it. If you'll wait, I'll be back in a moment. All right, all *right!*"

They heard her shrill voice echo in the passage and up the stairs.

"What a dreadful place, Jim," his mother whispered. "Can't we just slip away? And that horrible noise upstairs!"

Jim laughed. "You don't appreciate Mrs. Pooley. She was awfully kind to me."

"And who is this Miss Moger?"

Mrs. Pooley came hurrying downstairs again.

"She won't rest till she sees you," she said with an air of resignation. "So you'd better come up. It's no use trying to put her off. She's that sly and crafty. And her appetite, mind you! Rations? She just won't believe in them, thinks she's being starved out of spite. Starved . . . ! Honest, she'll eat up the Major's and mine and the girl's as well and then cry for more. Like a bottomless pit, that woman's stomach is! Why, many's the time that me and the Major have had to go short, and even then she's not satisfied. If you cross her an instant she starts to play Hamlet at once."

How familiar, Jim thought, was the smell of that narrow stairway with its old, steamy odour of cooking vegetables and oilcloth! Mrs. Pooley entered the first-floor front on tip-toe.

"*'Ere* 'e is," she said, "*and* his mother. Now I hope you're satisfied! But she won't be, you know," she added in an undertone to Jim. "Never is. That's the truth!"

Through the close, dim air, still tainted with fumes of stale incense, Jim saw, in front of the window, Miss Moger's *chaise-longue,* and on it the enormous, propped shape of Miss Moger herself. If that mass of pale flesh had once been enormous, it was now elephantine. The huge, dewlapped face, with its white incrustations of rice-powder, seemed even more ghastly for the fact that, of late, Miss Moger had dispensed with her auburn toupet. As Jim entered, a flash of recognition enlivened the eyes imbedded in this blank expanse; one side of the small, fish-like mouth was twitched into a mockery of a smile.

"She knows you, you see," Mrs. Pooley whispered hoarsely. "You know 'im, don't you, Miss Moger?" she shouted.

Miss Moger's body wallowed like a foundering whale's in token of assent.

"'Ad a seizure, you know," Mrs. Pooley confided in a whisper. "Can't form any words to speak of. Get stuck on her tongue, like. But her sight and her hearing, *and* her appetite," she added bitterly, "they're still A.1. Well, *now* are you satisfied?" she demanded at the top of her voice.

Miss Moger was not, as Jim judged by the fact that she forthwith burst into tears. Mrs. Pooley, however, was so skilled in this language of symbols that she needed no words of instruction.

"All right, I know what you want," she said. "It's 'er book she wants." As she darted away in search of it, Mrs. Pooley gave Jim the impression of a maternal and bewildered pipit condemned to minister to the monstrous needs of a half-grown cuckoo.

"She never gets tired of 'er book; it's more than the Bible to her," Mrs. Pooley whispered as she returned. "Don't you worry," she bawled at Miss Moger, "I know the page. Twenty-four. *Miss Rosita Moger bewitched all eyes and all 'earts.* Twenty-five. That's the picture. Yes, that's her favourite portrait. *Miss Moger, our new Kate Vaughan.*"

As she turned the pages, displaying once more the tokens of those thin old triumphs, the vague sadness that had troubled Jim when he saw them in bygone days was increased to a positive horror. Five years before, Miss Moger had been merely grotesque. This stricken mass of flesh was no longer grotesque; she was terrible—and more terrible than all else was the glow of pride that still had power to infuse and transport that sluggish mass of human tissue. As the landlady turned the pages she nodded her great white face emphatically and smiled sideways. It was as ghastly as though a corpse had shown signs of life.

"Well, *now* are you satisfied?" Mrs. Pooley demanded brusquely. "Yer tea? Why, Miss Moger, now *come*, you 'ad yer tea 'alf an hour ago. You're forgetting again. *Not* yer tea? Whatever is it, then? Not yer dinner surely! Them muffins can't have gone down yet." She spoke to Miss Moger as an indulgent mistress addresses a troublesome dog. "Ah, I know what she's wanting to say," she declared at last triumphantly. Her voice sank to a whisper. "I know. It's about number thirty. You remember the bad house, Mr. Redlake? Miss Moger, she sits here and watches it all day long. It's as good as a play to her seeing the soldiers come in and go out." Miss Moger leered and tapped the stars on Jim's tunic. "*And* the officers, too," Mrs. Pooley added. "That's it, Miss Moger, isn't it? I know what you mean, don't I?"

Miss Moger nodded eagerly, and as she did so her face assumed an evil air of lascivious knowingness. At the sound of the word "officers" she had nodded even more violently, and this spurt of her old Joy de Veeve seemed to Jim so obscene that he could bear the sight of her no longer and hastily excused himself.

"What a terrible spectacle, Jim," his mother said, as they turned down Lupus Street between swept heaps of vegetable refuse from the market stalls that stank as if it had lain there since before the war.

"Poor thing, she wasn't like that when I knew her, mother," he explained. "Mrs. Pooley's changed, too: the whole feeling of the house was different. It's curious. Nothing in England now seems quite what it used to be. No people, I mean. The war has just crushed the life out of them. However, I suppose I've got to go through all my broken illusions. I can't possibly stay in London and not see Julian's father. You'll come with me, won't you?"

"I don't know him. I think, perhaps, I had better not."

So Jim went alone to the house in Berkeley Square. If any house harboured ghosts for him, he thought, it should surely be this. Yet, when he rang at the lucent door and Page, the du Maurier butler, opened to him, he knew that this interview, however painful it might be, could not be as distressing as his visit to Lupus Street. Not even, he felt, if the rest of Berkeley Square were bombed to smithereens, could the air of repose and discreet withdrawal within those walls be deranged.

"Mr. Hinton is working in his study, Mr. Redlake," Page said. "Will you wait in the library?"

As he entered that familiar room, inhaling its pleasant smell of old leather, and pausing, for one moment, surprised at its sheer immutability, Jim was seized with an acute pang of regret for Julian, of remorse for the ungenerous pride with which he had allowed their friendship to lapse. When he thought of his friend, all the old, passionate worship and loyalty of his schooldays reclaimed him. The whole room was so charged with memories of the living Julian that his mind refused to accept the fact that Julian was dead; his memories were so vivid and potent that if, at that moment, Julian had appeared to him in the flesh as an emanation from those surroundings he would not have been surprised; the silence so eerie that he himself felt like a ghost and wondered how he had come there, if, indeed, he had ever been away.

The entrance of Marcus Hinton dissolved this hallucination. He came forward, a shrunken figure, faintly smiling, and stretched out his molelike hand.

"I felt that I wanted to come and see you, sir," Jim told him.

"I should have been sorry if I thought you hadn't wanted to come," Marcus Hinton replied in that quiet voice which Jim always heard with pleasure and surprise. They stood for a moment looking at each other in silence, and as they did so, Jim knew that neither of them could speak directly of Julian. Till that instant he had never guessed how much Julian had meant to his father. "How he must have suffered," he thought, "and how lonely he looks!"

"It's not that I'm lonely," Marcus Hinton continued—it was almost as if, in that long look, he had read Jim's mind—"my life's pretty full in these days getting money and credits out of America; but it's good for the soul to see people with whom one was happy before the deluge. I've hardly a free moment now in which to look at the things I love; yet, when I come to them, they're a wonderful consolation. More than that. They're a source of inexhaustible energy—like radium. They restore your sense of proportion, you know; they make you realize that there's something in life more important than the struggles of dynasts. Twenty years from now every one of the super-Dreadnoughts for which I'm borrowing money will have been scrapped; the only things that are likely to survive these years of frenzy are slender things like the pictures that men paint against time when they happen not to be killing each other, and the poems that they scribble on the flyleaves of their field-service pocket-books. You can't kill beauty, Jim. That Rembrandt over there first saw the light when Alva was ravaging the Low Countries. That vase left the painter's hands when Athens was falling. Of course, now I come to think of it, my Oread's an old love of yours, isn't she? Are you still faithful to her?"

Jim smiled. "She's as lovely as ever."

"Curiously enough, do you know, she always reminds me of my daughter-in-law. You know Cynthia, don't you?"

"I used to know her quite well."

"She's as lovely as ever, too. I don't see her often." His eyes hardened slightly. He left the subject suspended. "Tell me more of yourself," he said. "Are you still writing verses? You remember I liked the ones that you published."

Jim shook his head. "The war hasn't taken me like that," he said, "though, heaven knows, I've felt strongly enough about it."

"Well, perhaps that's a good thing. 'Emotion remembered in tranquillity'—the old definition! As a matter of fact most of our war-poets leave me cold. One's judgment is undermined by the pathos of them—I can't help seeing them as a dance of ephemerids hatched out of the mud of the trenches and spinning away before death dashes them down again. Your father's been very much to the fore, by the way, just lately."

"I've read nothing he's written."

"Well, really, you needn't." Marcus Hinton smiled. "His style, of course, is just as polished as ever. He's developed a ponderous epic manner that rather jars on people who have actually suffered. There's one man, though: a fellow named Starling . . ."

"Starling? I used to know him."

"Well, give him my compliments if you meet him again. He's the real thing. That man has seen beauty, for all his bitterness. The bitterness will fade with time, but the beauty's bound to remain. It's the one thing nothing can kill. I'm afraid I'm repeating myself—which means that I'm growing old," he said with a smile. "And now," he went on, "I suppose I must say good-bye to you. I've got to borrow ten million dollars to buy guns for Rumania. Don't forget, when this wretched business is over, to come and see me. If you're out of a job I may be able to help you."

Jim thanked him and went. It was true that Marcus Hinton had aged. The very fact that he hadn't mentioned Julian's name showed how hard he had been hit; yet the impression that Jim carried away with him from Berkeley Square that day was not one of despair and defeat but of hope and triumph. That frail man, in his beautiful house, had a power of inspiring faith and courage which, however different in its origins, resembled that which Jim had known at the front and lost as soon as he left it, achieving, in isolation, a curious immunity from the unstable passions of war. To Marcus Hinton, this catastrophe, however monstrous and cruel, was only an incident in man's tragic pilgrimage; through its smoke and flame the enduring idea of beauty shone still undimmed. Jim's puzzled spirit itself took fire from that stedfast flame; its faith was rekindled; he limped home to the hospital that evening with a new conviction that the world's ruin was not irreparable.

"You're down for a medical board to-morrow," the matron cheerfully announced. "I expect that'll mean good-bye. War Office orders. I suppose they're expecting a new offensive and we shall be swamped with convoys." She licked her lips ghoulishly. "All our convalescents have got to be cleared out by the end of the week. Never mind. If your leg goes wrong you'll soon be back again," she added, as though this grisly prospect might be some consolation.

Jim needed consolation of some kind. During his stay in London, the hospital, which had seemed at first so bleak and unfriendly by reason of its fixed routine, its sheer, steely sterility, had acquired in his eyes a warmth that was almost homely. He had made friends with the nursing-staff, with the patients, porters and orderlies. When he returned from his wanderings about London or from tea in the Wimpole Street house whose tragic air had been sweetened by his mother's gay personality, he found the long ward as welcoming and natural as his old little bedroom at Thorpe. The prospect of leaving it, of being cast out once more into a huge unfriendly world, intimidated him, made him painfully aware of a sort of spiritual nakedness.

A bodily nakedness too. For, from time to time, he still found himself a prey to fits of nervousness about his obstinate wound which nothing but his confidence in Fosdyke could assuage. He had begun to regard his stepfather not only as a surgeon but as a friend. There was something in the man's stability of temperament that made all life smoother. What was more—and this was most tragic of all—if the board decided to send him away from London he would forfeit the new and precious relationship with his mother to which he owed the greater part of his present happiness.

That night, with the matron's cheerful announcement shadowing his mind, he slept badly. Pain stalked the ward. The darkness was full of uneasy, distressful movements. A screened "case" on the left of him cried out in the grip of one of those terrors that haunted the brains of the shell-shocked, and could not be calmed. When Jim managed to sleep at last he dreamed about Cynthia with a vividness which of late had mercifully been spared him. He woke from this dream both shaken and shamed. Though its origin was clear enough—nothing less, in fact, than his contemplation of Marcus Hinton's Oread—it shocked him to think that any part of his mind could still be subject to that vanished enchantment; yet so real was the dream, so vivid and ravishing the experience, that even when day came, and with it a letter from Catherine, the memory of it hung about his brain like a mist which only full noon can dispel.

He was almost thankful, indeed, that he had the excitement of the medical board to engross him. He sat in an ante-room with twenty or thirty other blue-brassarded officers. The atmosphere was painful. The bulk of them were brave men, as many could prove by the medal-ribbons they wore; yet there were few among them who did not betray more signs of nervousness before this trifling ordeal than ever they were likely to show in a trench at zero hour. The restlessness of that ante-room seemed to Jim like that of a sheep-pen outside a shambles; the victims passed from it, one by one, to meet their fate, in cold blood without any of the exultations of battle. The thing that troubled them most was not the prospect of being marked fit for general service, but a dread lest it should be imagined that they were trying to shirk it which struggled with a hope against hope that the board might grant them a few more weeks of respite.

"I shall ask the blighters to mark me fit for G.S.," Jim heard one declare.

"Why shouldn't you? You know perfectly well that they won't," said another enviously.

"Well, anything's better than having it hanging over you. This is the third time I've been up for a board in the last two months. Each time they've given me three weeks. What's the use of three weeks? At the front you know where you are. If your number's up, it's up—and that's that! But this cat-and-mouse game . . ."

"Captain Trevor!" an orderly called, and the first man rose with a sigh. He wore three medal-ribbons on his chest, but his face was like chalk. He stalked into the board-room with a swaggering smile on his lips.

"*He*'s all right," said the second to Jim. "Old Trevor knows he's no chance of G.S. The devil of it is that these doctor chaps look at you and paw you over as though they took it for granted that you were skrimshanking. That's all right if you happen to have a leg in a splint like yourself, but it's hell for a fellow like me: I'm not fit, but I've nothing to show for it. If you try to explain what's wrong they think you're swinging the lead. If you don't, they're so up to the eyes in work that they're likely to miss it. I'm not burning to go back to France—well, nobody is—but I know I'm no damned good to the regiment the way I am."

The door opened again. The gallant Trevor returned with a flushed flustered face.

"No need to ask questions," said his friend. "I see you're all right. How long have they given you?"

"A month, this time. They're a better lot than the last board. I asked them for General Service. They only laughed at me."

"Mr. Redlake!" the orderly shouted.

Jim entered the board-room. Behind a long table, littered with papers, three officers of the R.A.M.C. were writing and signing papers for all they were worth. For a moment they took no notice of Jim. Then the president, a colonel, affixed his last signature to the triplicate report and stared at him sternly.

"Still on crutches? What's your name? Redlake? Oh, Colonel Fosdyke's told me about you. How's the wound? Not quite healed? Well, that simplifies matters anyway."

"East Africa," said the man on his left, glancing over Jim's papers. "That's a bad show. Ankylosed knee-joint, h'm. I see it says you've had malaria and dysentery too. Any fever lately?"

Jim told him he had had an attack about ten days before.

"No use wasting time over that," said the president sharply. "Better give him three months and send him out into the country."

"I'd much rather stay in London, sir, if it's possible," Jim pleaded.

The Colonel smiled grimly. "I'm sure you would. Everyone says that. I wish *I* could get out of London. You don't know your luck."

"We've got to free beds," said his neighbour; "we can't keep convalescents here. In any case you can see he's anæmic and needs fresh air."

"This officer's wound is still unhealed." The Colonel began to dictate with a grunt and two other scratching pens followed him. *"The board recommends further treatment.* Let's stick to the main point; you needn't mention malaria or anything of that kind. *Fit for G.S.: No. Fit for Home Service: No. Fit for Garrison Duty abroad: No.* Better give him six months . . . no, three, or they'll get excited. All right, Mr. Redlake. Convalescent hospital for you. Hurry up with those papers!" He looked at the clock impatiently, and the orderly at the door, out of sheer submissiveness, did the same. "Next officer, corporal!"

Jim hesitated. "Have you any idea where they'll send me, sir?"

"That's a matter of vacant beds. What's your county, anyway?"

"I belong to Leicestershire, sir."

"Very well. Make a note of it, Simmons. If they have any empty beds. We can't promise anything."

"Mr. Martin!" the corporal bawled. As Jim limped through the doorway be encountered the officer with whom he had been talking in the ante-room advancing with ashen cheeks.

"What have you got?" he asked hurriedly.

"Three months."

"Lucky devil!"

"Come along! Hurry up, there!" the Colonel's voice called.

Next morning when she made her first round of the wards the matron brought Jim his orders and a railway-warrant. *Proceed forthwith to Auxiliary Hospital Thorpe Castle near Melton Mowbray.*

"You can leave after lunch," she said. "I'm sorry to lose you, Mr. Redlake. However, we'll say *au revoir*, not good-bye. You never know with a knee," she added cheerfully.

That same morning, amid the dissimulated agony of his farewells to his mother, the porter brought in a cable. Jim opened it eagerly, hoping it might tell him that Mark and Catherine were sailing. The first word, Capetown, brought the blood to his cheeks. Then he stared at the text in bewilderment. It came from a firm of lawyers, regretfully informing him that their client Walter Delahay had died of pneumonia at Schoengesicht, and that an important letter would follow.

III. *Thorpe Folville Revisited*

JIM'S journey northward that day was an uneasy experience. This sudden uprooting from an order of life which, alien though it had seemed at first, had lately represented the norm of existence, together with the wrench of leaving his mother, who now meant more to him than ever before, augmented the curious state of disorientation, apprehensiveness and spiritual nudity that he had dreaded.

As the train cleared the outskirts of London he found himself re-reading the South African cable whose import, in the pangs and confusion of parting, he had hardly realized. For mile after mile the image of Walter Delahay kept him company. Familiar with death as the African front had made him, this blind descent of the dark angel on the security of Schoengesicht hurt him more deeply. It was not till this moment that he fully knew how much he loved Walter Delahay, how much he owed to him. That brusque, hard man, whose romantic nature, so nearly akin to his own, had only revealed its essential tenderness in the rare glimpses of Trewern and Sterkstroom, had influenced him more deeply than any other human being—not only by succouring the body that fell unconscious on the flags at Trewern but by bringing light and reason into his disordered life. It was Walter Delahay who had thought it worth while to make a man of him, who had helped him to stand upright in the world on the dignity of his own feet. Jim had never been able to find words to repay his indebtedness—words, indeed, were a coinage that his cousin habitually treated with small respect. Now, even if he found them, such words would never be heard. Walter Delahay, whose fearlessness looked upon life as though he would live for ever, had died, unobtrusively as he had lived, with all the threads of the vast, imaginative enterprise that he had woven upon the surface of his beloved Africa still clutched in his fingers. The world had lost a great man, blood-brother of Rhodes, and Jim his best friend among men.

As the train roared northward over the flat Midland fields there were other ghosts with him beside Walter Delahay's: the ghost of a boy, in the exquisite fever of first love, counting the moments that carried him nearer to his idol; the ghost of another boy, crushed and humiliated by that idol's cruelty, hurrying, with a numbed mind, to the deathbed of his only friend; the ghost of a young, spare man, with a clipped moustache and a bronzed brow knitted by the glare of tropical suns, who stared at him perplexedly from the mirror on the opposite side of the compartment.

This shifting sense of unreality, which made the whole journey seem aimless and even threatening, so weighed on his mind that he forced himself to banish these ghosts from it, to think of more stable things. Cold Orton, for instance. He was determined, as soon as they would let him, to go over to the Vicarage and tell Mr. Malthus of his love for Catherine. The mere fact of visiting Cold Orton, that shrine of untroubled sanity, would be enough. He approached it with the confidence that inspires a cripple on his journey to Lourdes as a mystical source of healing for all his uncertainties. More than that. As soon as Catherine and Mark reached England she was sure to make straight for Cold Orton. Their sailing from Capetown could not be delayed much longer. And then . . . and then . . . His eyes filled with tears at the thought of that meeting's intolerable sweetness.

Yet, strangely enough, the more he compelled his mind to concentrate on Cold Orton and Catherine, the more obstinately did the memory of the last night's dream of Cynthia return to him. If Cold Orton offered him sanctuary, Thorpe Castle, his immediate goal, bristled with dangers. When he had asked to be sent into Leicestershire he had been thinking of Catherine; the prospect of going to Thorpe Castle had not even entered his mind. Supposing that Cynthia should be there? She was as lovely as ever; so Marcus Hinton had told him. As his mother had warned him, she was free. Was it likely that Cynthia in the flesh would be less compelling than the irresistible Cynthia of his dreams—a Cynthia whose presence would now be reinforced by a setting of such rapturous memories?

As the train drew nearer to Melton and each familiar landmark, hammered in like a rivet, gave strength to the mood in which those memories obsessed him, Jim tore himself away from them, determined, at all costs, to escape from the tyranny that this past imposed on him, to drink deep of the present. This was the first time since his return, apart from his hurried journey from Bristol to London, that he had set eyes on the English countryside. Though May was nearly past, there was little in it of the green mirages which had tortured his brain in the African bush. A cold wind, blowing from the north-east, froze all the colour out of spring. It had blown the last blossom of sloe and wild cherry away, and checked the hawthorn-buds bursting in the shivering hedgerows. The flat landscape that slowly unrolled itself seemed dim and wintry; across a blank, sunless sky the lapwings flopped, heavily as herons, or swooped downward hungrily to melancholy expanses of unquickened green. The compartment was icy; his heat-thinned blood resented it.

"Yet it's May," he thought, "an English summer with Catherine! Will summer never begin?"

The last words, formed in his brain, unsealed a spring of memory —a line of poetry which Julian and he had read together in the flush of their pre-Raphaelite enthusiasm. *Why did the summer not begin* —— The whole verse took sudden shape before he could realize its ironical appositeness:

I made another garden, yea,
  For my new love;
I left the dead rose where it lay,
  And set the new above.
Why did the summer not begin?
  Why did my heart not haste?
My old love came and walked therein,
  And laid the garden waste.

Were the ghosts of dead poets in league with those other ghosts? Jim refused to admit it. In any case, at that moment, the long sigh of hydraulic brakes gave him fortunate release from such shadowy questionings. The block of a signal-box flashed past; the checked train slid into Melton. He pulled himself together and began, somewhat unsteadily—for his stiff leg still hampered him—to collect his belongings. On the platform, in a tight blue Red Cross uniform which emphasized her old-fashioned figure in the part that was most adequately designed to display the ribbon of the O.B.E., stood Mrs. Jewell, her red face flushed with importance, haranguing the stationmaster because the train was two minutes late.

Jim hopped to the platform and saluted her, addressing her by name. This liberty, on the part of a patient, appeared to affront her dignity. She drew back from Jim's outstretched hand like an offended parrot. Then, suddenly, she recognized him. "Oh, it's *you*, is it?" she said without enthusiasm. "How extremely odd! I've a car outside. Can't you carry your kit? Porter . . . porter!"

Though she was nominally the Quartermaster of Lady Essendine's hospital at Thorpe Castle, the proper functions of this office were the least part of Mrs. Jewell's activities, which embraced the supervision not only of the War Office and Admiralty but of the Cabinet, the Ministry of Food, the railways, the Army Chaplain's Department (by proxy, through Mr. Jewell) and General Headquarters in France—of everything, in fact, from the *morale* of the trenches to the morals of the scullery at Thorpe Castle. By virtue of her family's distinguished military history this war was her war, and nobody could dispute or share rights of possession save authentic regular officers of high rank. In her eyes Jim Redlake had no standing whatever. As a temporary officer he was dowered with a crushing weight of original sin; as a colonial he laboured under suspicions even heavier, being prone, as such, to every kind of indiscipline from mutiny to rape. The fact that he was wounded made no claim on Mrs. Jewell's sympathy. It implied, at the best, an amateur's carelessness; at the worst, a deliberate attempt to escape from the front. From the first moment of their meeting she made it quite clear that Jim could not expect to presume on their former acquaintance. He was a patient—the very next thing to a criminal—and the last thing he was expected to do at Thorpe Castle was to feel at home.

"I don't expect you will stay with us long," she said with a grim satisfaction, as she took the wheel of the waiting car. "We pride ourselves on turning our officers out quicker than any other hospital in the Command. Of course, when you're fit for active service again, you'll get three weeks' leave. I'm thankful to say that the indiscriminate granting of leave is over. At Thorpe we pride ourselves on the strictness of our discipline."

"I'm not due for another board for three months, you know," Jim told her.

"That means nothing," she said. "You can always ask for one. *We* don't think very much of officers who take what they're given at a time like this. In any case, I consider it a great mistake to allow any officers to go into a hospital near their own homes. It softens them. However," she added sternly, "you won't find being near home makes much difference *here*. *I* take good care of that! Our rules are the same for everyone. We make no exceptions."

She pulled up the car with alarming suddenness abreast of a soldier on leave who was tramping back to the station in his muddy uniform.

"Come here!" she commanded. The man gaped at her and obeyed. "Did you see this officer here?" He smiled awkwardly at Jim. "Then why, I should like to know, did you fail to salute? Is that the way they teach you to behave in the Leicesters? You're not a colonial, remember! I've a very good mind to write to your commanding officer. Just because you're on leave you've no business to forget that you are a soldier."

"I'm sorry, madam," the man began . . .

"Well, don't do it again. It's that kind of thing," she explained to Jim as they started once more, "that is losing the war. An incident of that kind could never have happened in Germany. What's more, I won't have it!"

By way of changing the painful subject Jim mentioned Lady Essendine.

"The Commandant," Mrs. Jewell corrected him, "is, naturally, at her post."

"And Cynthia?"

The eager anxiety of his question was obscured for Mrs. Jewell by the use of a Christian name which she regarded as her prerogative.

"*Lady* Cynthia," she said, underlining the first word, "is at present in London. She doesn't take her duties as seriously as some of us."

"Well, thank God for that," Jim thought. He thanked God, even more, that this dangerous encounter was likely to be postponed. In the absence of that emotional danger the thought of Thorpe

Castle, even as Mrs. Jewell had painted it, became more inviting. He enquired of the Malthuses.

"I know nothing whatever about them," Mrs. Jewell boasted, implying that the doings of a mere civilian had no interest for her. "Mr. Holly is still in Egypt, but not at the front, I am sorry to say. Your cousin is doing her duty. She has had a son."

"And little Miss Minnet?" Jim asked.

The red face hardened. "Edna Minnet," Mrs. Jewell said darkly, "has no sense of discipline where her maids are concerned, but I keep my eye on her."

"She was a friend of my mother's, you know." Jim felt bound to apologize; but at the mention of his mother Mrs. Jewell's eye grew steelier than ever. As that of the "guilty party" in a divorce case Jim's mother's name could not be mentioned in Thorpe, much less in her company.

At this moment, fortunately, there was no need to prolong the uncomfortable theme. Mrs. Jewell's mastery over matter stopped short of gear-boxes. With a crash of agonized metal she stalled her engine under the arch of the castle gate-house. Jim spoke no more. Indeed, as the wooded vistas of the park unrolled themselves, the long glades where that remnant of the herd of roedeer which had escaped the Quartermaster's zeal for economy in butcher's-meat stood placidly feeding, the glamorous spirit of the place swirled back into his mind in a flood of memories that could not be denied. When the broken façade of the Castle loomed through the tapestries of green-gold beeches, a Red Cross flag flapping languidly from the summit of the keep, he was thankful that Mrs. Jewell's determination to right the disorders that had accumulated during her absence made her keep silence. As he hopped out of the car this gathering flood of emotion brought him near to unwilling tears.

In the dim hall, still smelling of pot pourri, old wood and furniture polish, still dominated by the armoured figures and tattered pennons of St. Quentin, Lady Essendine—the "Commandant," as Mrs. Jewell persisted in addressing her—received him with an affability that her Quartermaster must surely have disapproved.

"*So* nice of you to come here," she said, with the charming smile that he knew so well. "I'm sorry Cynthia's away. She'll be so disappointed. She went up to town only yesterday. We're expecting her back next week, though. Just like old times. I suppose you're surgical," she said, with a glance at Jim's rigid leg. "I'm afraid you won't be able to have your old room," she added apologetically. "Where used you to sleep? In Bachelor's Row? I forget . . ."

"Mr. Redlake will be in the green ward, Commandant," Mrs. Jewell said firmly. "He is *not* a field-officer."

"Oh, aren't you? What a pity!" Lady Essendine murmured, as though military titles, like those of nobility, were hereditary. "Still, you know your way, don't you? Dear dear, what *am* I saying? The green drawing room—*you* remember—the one with the Lawrence portrait. *So* nice to see you, Jim. How's your charming father? Do tell him from me we all thought his last book quite divine. What did you say, Mrs. Jewell? I'm sorry . . ."

It was not so much what Mrs. Jewell had said as what she was quite obviously thinking. "The post goes at five, Commandant," she said. "All these new returns . . ."

As Lady Essendine gracefully faded away she possessed herself of Jim's person and of his documents, and proceeded to show him that their relationship, at any rate, was not sentimental. Within half an hour, against all reason and in spite of his protests, she had him safely in bed. All new cases, she told him, went there as a matter of routine and stayed there until the doctor, his grandfather's successor, had examined them.

The jade-green drawing-room, the green ward as they called it now, had been stripped of its brocaded furniture, its crystal sconces; the Lawrence portrait was gone. Of all its old graces nothing remained but the pale pine panelling, the Grinling Gibbons medallion, and the central chandelier of cascading Venetian glass. Of the twelve white enamelled beds only two beside Jim's were occupied by a couple of New Army officers named Harris and Jones, of that later type which Mrs. Jewell regarded as her legitimate prey. The ward had been swept nearly clean by her last purgation, and it wouldn't be her fault if either of them stayed there much longer. They were both decent lads of the lower middle class, at once awed, and a little defiant of their present surroundings. The language that they spoke was almost unintelligible to Jim, for the luridly decorated jargon of the Flanders front had not been current in German East. They adored Lady Essendine

(The Countess, they called her) for being, as they said, a high-stepper, a regular thoroughbred, with no side about her. They had both of them been shattered, quite naturally, by the beauty of Cynthia (whom they called Lady Hinton) and, just as reasonably, were frightened to death of "old Jewell," whose name, they considered, was a mistake, and who could beat any sergeant-major they'd ever met on his own parade-ground. As for Thorpe . . . Well, a place like that was all right in its way. The food was A1, and several of the V.A.D.'s (in spite of Mrs. Jewell's restrictive selection) peaches. But, as one of them said, the country was not like the seaside (he'd been invalided to Blackpool first: thumbs up!) where you could go to a teashop or take a bit of skirt to the pictures. What was the good of three pips and a wound-stripe if you couldn't do that? There was more fun going in Rou-on, and that was a fact. Yes, Rou-on was all right—if you knew your way about, mind you.

From this Captain Harris went on, by way of enlightening Jim, to explain just exactly what was wrong with the aristocracy, as represented for him by the Countess and Lady Hinton.

"It isn't that they're not polite, you know," he maintained. "The fact of the matter is—and Jones here agrees, mind—that they're too damned polite. You don't get it at first. When you meet them they make you think you're the Lord God Almighty—wounded hero and all that. But when it's gone on for a bit you begin to see through 'em. You recognize the same tune every time, like a gramophone record. I don't blame them, though, mind you; they have to learn their job, same as I did when first I went into the outfitting. And they've learnt it damned well; I'll give them full marks for that. You can drop a brick bang on their toes and they keep on smiling. But don't you imagine," he warned Jim, "that the smiles mean anything, or you'll get a long drop! My pal, Jones here, will bear me out."

"That's a fact," Mr. Jones, of the Sherwood Foresters, agreed.

They got on very well together; and, indeed, Jim was thankful for this or for anything else that might divert his mind from dwelling on the memories that clung to the jade-green drawing-room. All went swimmingly until, in the evening, Lady Essendine appeared on her evening round, drifting into the ward with the air of having mislaid something, and suddenly discovering that what she had lost was Jim.

"Oh, *here* you are, Jim," she exclaimed. "I do hope you're quite comfortable. It's strange for you to be sleeping here—these rules are *so* boring—but this room makes a charming ward, don't you think so? And later, I'm sure we shall be able to manage something different. I've sent Cynthia a postcard to say that you're here. She'll be too thrilled, I know."

Jim wished to heaven that she hadn't. The mention of Cynthia's name, quite unreasonably, troubled him. He wished, even more devoutly, that she hadn't been so familiar in calling him Jim. The effect on his two companions was devastating. From that moment the frank comradeship to which they had admitted him vanished like hoar-frost, or rather, was replaced by a guardedness that was more than frosty and which no efforts of friendliness on Jim's part could thaw. He was made to feel that he had crept into their company on false pretences and that this was resented.

"You didn't tell us," Harris complained, "that the Countess was a friend of yours, nor Lady Hinton."

"You see I lived near here for years," Jim told them defensively. It was clearly necessary to apologize for this acquaintanceship; but apologies, in this case, could make no difference. For all his good will, he had aroused the suspicions of "the other side."

That first night he slept badly—not because his surroundings were strange; they were, alas, only too familiar. In the darkness of a moonless night the jade drawing-room, to which, in spite of its sharp antiseptic odours, some remnant of the castle's characteristic perfume still clung, took on its old shapes. It was almost as if, at midnight, the ghosts of the brocaded furniture, the piano, the Lawrence drawing, returned. Above the antiphonal bourdon of snores that emanated from his two companions, Jim seemed to hear a faint music: a fountain's murmur, the soft calling of distant horns. All the things that had happened to him during the last five years—the sun-baked ardours of his life at Schoengesicht, the splendid adventure of East Africa, even the enchanted week with Catherine Malthus at Durban—seemed to sink down into darkness like a dream that founders on waking. His only reality, at that moment, was the jade-green drawing-room, with Julian at the piano and Lucy kneeling beside him, and Cynthia, her lovely body transfigured with fire, her long hands clasped round her knees, her mouth solemn, her eyes pools of darkness, deep and inscrutable. He rebelled against this possession. Her beauty was like a poison in his blood—like those spores of malaria, long dormant, that had power, without warning, to wrap his body in fire. Yet, even when he succeeded at last in driving her image out of his mind, the lines of the O'Shaughnessy poem which had invaded it in the train stole back again:

Why did the summer not begin?
Why did my heart not haste?
My old love came and walked therein,
And laid the garden waste.

In the small hours he fell asleep, to wake, as the clock in the castle tower struck five, to such a pæan of bird-song as his ears had never heard. From a faint whimper of liquid sound that barely ruffled the morning's veil of greyness it swelled to a torrent of exultation, so gay, so innocent, so meltingly lovely that, in spite of himself, his heart choked and his grim lips smiled. How could he ever have maintained, he asked himself, that there was bird-song in Africa? As he listened, enraptured, he had a vision of England's dim greenness, league beyond league, slowly emerging out of a pearl-grey dawn, with the dew on her grass like the bloom of a newly-hatched butterfly; of the light welling out of the bleak North Sea, stealing gradually westward—and, moving before the light, proclaiming the rout of darkness and scaling its citadels, this wave of music, irresistibly bubbling out of myriads of fluttering hearts and tiny syrinxes, till the dreaming land was drowned in triumphant sound.

"This is England," Jim thought. "At last! This is really England! Will they never stop singing?"

The burst of song faded away almost as suddenly as it had begun. Jim heard the harsh clarion-call of a pheasant, a lazy cuckoo sailed slowly past above the layers of mist. In the cedar outside the green ward a solitary throstle sang. So near he seemed, now that the massed orison was over, that he might almost have been perched on the window-sill. For some moments he squawked and scolded; then, as though inspiration seized him, launched into a snatch of an incredibly bright heart-piercing purity. Again and again he sang that broken phrase. At the third essay he stopped in the midst of it, as though suddenly shy of his lonely song. He fluttered away with an audible whirr of wings, and a silence, like that of noon, fell on the lawns. "They are beginning to sing at Trewern now," Jim thought, as he turned over to sleep again.

"May I wash you, please?"

Of course, as Jim protested, he could easily do that for himself, but the V.A.D. was proud of her newly acquired technique, and Harris and Jones watched the operation with evident envy. At breakfast-time Mrs. Jewell swept in to see that no rules had been broken. She discovered one glaring triangle of dust displayed by the sunlight and raised hell about it. The doctor, she told Jim sternly, would examine him at eleven. *"Then,"* her tone implied, "we shall see if your wound is genuine."

He came, the doddering old gentleman whose attentions Miss Minnet dreaded because he was a bachelor. Mrs. Jewell stood over him, to the sister's annoyance, like a warder, with loaded rifle, watching a dangerous convict at work.

"There's no reason why he shouldn't be up and about," he said, doubtfully eyeing Mrs. Jewell, to see if she approved of his verdict. "On the other hand . . ." He fingered his chin . . .

"I've been up and about for two months, sir," Jim interrupted.

"In that case, you can't stay here long," Mrs. Jewell said triumphantly. "In the meantime, Mr. Redlake, though this house is familiar to you, I want you to realize that you're in a military hospital and under discipline. Please remember that officers are not allowed to go outside the park without leave. Of course we cannot prevent your having visitors at the proper hours," she added regretfully.

The village, in any case, lay nearly a mile from the castle, and therefore beyond his present range of movement. Apart from Miss Minnet there was nobody whom he particularly desired to see. Jim's mother, however, had warned the Malthuses of his coming, and on the day that followed his arrival Mrs. Malthus and Cecilia cycled over from Cold Orton to greet him. They sat talking in the garden under the crusader's cedars, and their very presence was enough to exorcize the uneasiness with which Jim's return to Thorpe Castle afflicted him. It was as cool and refreshing as the breeze that made the cedars sigh.

Until that day Jim had never taken much notice of Mrs. Malthus; his memories of Cold Orton were so dominated by her husband. Now, as Catherine's mother, he surveyed her with interested eyes. Her neat, frail figure, so gentle, so unobtrusive, had a distinction that, to a close observer, surpassed Lady Essendine's. However severely or shabbily she was dressed, it was impossible for anyone to take her for anything but a lady. It was an exquisite pleasure, of itself, to listen to the unmannered English that fell from her thin, sweet lips. Her speech, as he realized with a thrill of recognition, was exactly like Catherine's; her eyes, too, had Catherine's soft candour, with something added: the peculiar air of wise innocence that nothing can give to the eyes but a life of clean, active quietude. Their blue—how different from Cynthia's burning azure!—was that of mild English skies reflected in placid water, the softened blue of dark-flowered love-in-a-mist. Beneath her hair's silvery severity they gazed gently at Jim with a kindness almost maternal; and, though a fine network of wrinkles betrayed their age, he felt they were the youngest eyes he had ever seen—far younger than Cecilia's, who, after all, was no more than a charming young animal, resembling her brother Mark. Mrs. Malthus's gaze, indeed, so compelling yet so unimperious, imposed on his conversation an exalted standard of truthfulness, beneath which the harmless falseness of conventional usage seemed naked and shamed. When Mrs. Malthus spoke of Mark and Catherine Jim could not believe that they were separated from them by a third of the length of the world; the love that united her to her family took no count of space or of time; however distant their bodies might be, their home was her heart; the intimacy of the spiritual bond was so close that, listening to her voice, Jim would not have been surprised to raise his eyes and see Catherine standing at his elbow. Mrs. Malthus's presence made Catherine more real to him than she had ever been since the day of their parting at Durban, and when, for a moment, Cecilia providentially left them alone, to dash off on her bicycle to the village, this miracle encouraged him to open his heart to her mother.

"Did Catherine tell you," he asked, "what happened to us in Durban?"

"Yes, Jim dear. She wrote to her father," Mrs. Malthus replied.

"And . . . what did you think of it?"

"We were both of us very happy."

"I love her terribly, Mrs. Malthus."

She smiled gently. "We all love you as well. We're almost as anxious for your happiness as we are for Catherine's."

"Heaven knows, I'm happy in this! Have you told Cecilia?"

"No, we haven't told anybody. Catherine didn't wish it."

"Why, I wonder? Wouldn't it be better if everyone knew?"

"She's a queer girl, Jim dear. I know her better than you do. Do you mind my telling you that? No, you mustn't. She's curiously shy, and very serious. After all, it's a serious matter—the most serious of all. You can't blame her, Jim. You must be very patient with her, because you can't hurry her. All my children are like that, and so, of course, is their father."

"If only we were properly engaged, you know, things would be so much easier."

"So much easier? What things, Jim? I don't understand what you mean."

"I don't know." Mrs. Malthus's eyes—Catherine's eyes—gazed straight into his, and he blushed in spite of himself, as though they had discovered something false in him. "I only wish to goodness she were here; it would make all the difference."

"If you really love each other, Jim, her being away can make no difference whatever."

"Oh, yes, that's all right in theory!"

"In practice too, Jim. I know, or I shouldn't say so."

"I suppose you are right," he admitted; "but I wish she were here. At any rate you'll come over and see me often, won't you?"

"As often as I can, of course. Life's very full at Cold Orton. You see we have Rossington as well to look after now."

"It's the next best thing to seeing Catherine, you know."

She smiled, and once more her eyes seemed to probe the depth of his anxiousness. "Well, Catherine and Mark are almost certain to sail next week," she said. "You can't be more impatient than we are. Here comes Cecilia. I'm afraid we must say good-bye to you. I have to visit one of Lucy's old ladies in Rossington. The baby keeps her so busy that she has no time to spare. Good-bye, Jim dear."

For the first time since he was a boy she kissed him with her thin, sweet lips, and Cecilia clasped his hand in her hot, strong fingers, smiling at him with her frank, almost boyish eyes.

"She'd make a good wife for any man," Jim thought, "but she's not like Catherine."

Long after their two bicycles had dwindled away down the drive, the cool, sweet air of Cold Orton that they had brought with them enveloped him like the homely smell of a cottage-garden posy. The rich tranquillity of the life from which they came was as different from the Essendines' ruthless self-sufficiency as the self-consciously defiant attitude of the admirable Harris and Jones, to whose company he returned for tea.

"There's something I want to ask you, Mr. Redlake," said the shy V.A.D. who brought it. "You won't be offended, will you? Are you any relation . . . ?"

"Yes, I am. He's my father," Jim told her.

"Well, there! We've all been wondering. I told my friend that you looked as if you were literary."

"Is it as bad as that?"

"Don't be foolish. You ought to be proud of being connected with him. We all read that wonderful book about the Front Line. He makes you realize the war far better than any of our patients here. As a matter of fact we're full of literary celebrities. Edward Starling, the poet's in Ward Two. A most frightening person."

"Edward Starling? I know him quite well. I must go and see him."

"You can do that quite easily now. Our precious Jewell's in Melton, and sister's off duty. Shall I tell him?"

"No, I'd rather surprise him. Old Starling! To think of it!"

"I say, Redlake," said Harris severely, "if there's any celebrity you *don't* know, you might tell Jones and I about it. I've seen some of this Starling's stuff in a thing they call the *Cambridge Magazine.* If that's Cambridge, all I can say is I'm damned glad I never went there—or Oxford either. It's just dirty, pro-German bilge. If I or Jones here had our way that blighter would be shot at dawn up against a brick wall same as you would a deserter. How a fellow like that ever got a commission beats me. And Jones'll agree."

"That's a fact," Mr. Jones said grimly.

"You can tell him from me, if you like," Mr. Harris continued . . .

But the message, however faithfully it reflected the opinion of militant England, was never delivered. In Ward Two, his drawn face obscured by a volume of Shelley, Jim found the old Starling. His tunic was decorated by the ribbons of a D.C.M. and a Military Cross with a bar.

"Hello, where have you blown in from, Redlake?" was all his greeting.

"East Africa. I only heard you were here half an hour ago. What's wrong? Were you hit?"

"Through the lung. I suppose you would like to think it was self-inflicted? Well, it wasn't. A sniper got me, blast his eyes!"

"That's a rotten job," Jim suggested.

"You can cut out the sympathy. The chap next to me was hit through the brain two seconds earlier. It's a bloody business." His dark eyes blazed.

"How long have you been in it?"

"Joined up in 'fifteen. My younger brother got killed. I saw red. That's why. That, and reading the hypocritical tosh that your father turns out. I joined up too early. If I'd known conscription was coming I'd have damned well stayed out of it and become a Conscientious Objector. Those chaps show they've got some guts."

"You've not done so badly." Jim pointed to the row of ribbons.

"That childishness? All my eye! When you get them, they force you to wear them. You can spit on them for all that I care," he added savagely. "England, my England! As soon as this cursed war's over I'm going to clear out of it."

"You've been writing poetry, I hear."

"Who told you that?"

"Marcus Hinton, the banker. He was very keen on them. Asked me to tell you so."

"Marcus Hinton? The millionaire? I hope they made him sit up." Even so, Jim saw that Starling was flattered. "I've been meeting a lot of blokes of his kind lately," he went on to say. "You tell him he ought to read my novels as well."

"Are you writing another?"

"No fear. My novels don't pay. No novelist's successful unless he's a hypocrite like your egregious father. I'll write one about *him*, someday. In the meantime my grateful country supports me. So I write verses. They'll sit up and beg for anything I write."

"About the war?"

"No. Against it."

"You won't make yourself popular, just now."

Starling laughed. "That's all *you* know about it. It tickles your English hypocrite to be told the truth. He rather enjoys it. People like this . . ." Starling waved his arm indefinitely.

"What people?" Jim asked.

"These Essendines. Have you heard of their daughter, Cynthia . . . *Lady* Cynthia?" he added, with a scornful emphasis. "She's what journalists call a famous society beauty. Not so bad looking, either. Well, Redlake, I treat her like dirt, and now she'll eat out of my hand. You should see her!"

He chuckled with innocent pride, and Jim guessed at once that Starling, as a matter of fact, had been tricked into eating out of hers. "How like Cynthia!" he thought. "She's reduced him to pulp already, and the poor devil doesn't know it."

"I refuse to stand any of their nonsense," Starling boasted. "They're so used to folk creeping and crawling that when anyone treats them like human beings they sit up and take notice. She's not the first either. Since I've been a wounded hero"—he snarled on the word—"I've met quite a lot of *her* kind. She's in London at the moment." He laughed. "I almost miss her."

"Another victim," Jim thought scornfully. "Why doesn't she do it thoroughly and wear their scalps?"

A nurse came quietly to Starling's bedside.

"You've been here long enough, Mr. Redlake. You mustn't tire him with talking."

Starling almost purred. It was just this sort of attention for which his defiant loneliness had always craved.

"You'll come again, won't you?" he said with pathetic submissiveness.

Jim promised that he would. Every day he went to see Starling. In the meantime the spring offensive of Plumer's Second Army broke on the Wytschaete Ridge in an explosion of gigantic mines. Alec Folville was wounded at Messines, so Lady Essendine hurried away to join Cynthia in London, leaving Thorpe to the untempered mercy of Mrs. Jewell. Jim was happy at Thorpe; Captain Harris, having cautiously decided (with Lieut. Jones's approval) that Jim wasn't entirely a "toff" after all, had finally accepted him; while Mrs. Jewell, swollen with the importance of receiving new convoys, and reluctantly realizing that Jim's wound wouldn't allow of his being shot off to the front yet, took no more than a contemptuous notice of him. With the Malthuses' visits the placid influence of Cold Orton grew stronger each day. His malaria flared up less frequently. He began to take exercise, walking further and further, till at last he reached Rose Cottage.

Miss Minnet received him raptly; her voice failed completely.

"Why haven't you been to see me?" he asked her. "You knew I was there."

The answer was Mrs. Jewell. "I could never have dared," Miss Minnet confessed, "to walk right up to the Castle by myself and ring the bell. The drive is so terribly open; she'd be sure to have seen me. You see, I've never, in all my life, been inside the gates, Jim darling."

"Well, here I am anyway," he told her. "I see you've got my photograph."

"I've got more than that now!" She smiled as she fluttered round him, like a shy bird pecking at crumbs. "I've got you, Jim dear. Do you know," she confessed, "this is the first time I've had a real officer in the house, let alone a wounded one! I'm so proud, I can scarcely contain myself!"

In a moment Jim found himself back in the far-off days of his boyhood, those first days at Thorpe, when he had wakened early to hear Ernest grooming Nimrod and the clack of shod hoofs in the road as the strings of hunters went past. In Miss Minnet's drawing-room not even a bamboo table or a peacock's feather was changed. He propped his leg up on the milking-stool, that arch-symbol of the late 'nineties, at whose wet enamel he had sniffed fifteen years before. Miss Minnet brought out all that Edith and Elsie had left of her Crown Derby tea-set; it was just as if he had never set foot in Africa, as if there had been no war. They spoke, with the happiness that may be extracted from old distresses, of the morning when Jim had driven away in the carrier's van.

"When you turned the corner," Miss Minnet said, "I rushed upstairs and cried, I felt I should probably never see you again."

"And you put fifty pounds in my lunch. I've never thanked you properly."

"You needn't have sent it back, Jim. It was yours. It will always be yours. I shall never touch it. Never! Who knows? When the war is over you may find yourself short of money," said Miss Minnet proudly.

"I don't think you need be anxious about that," he told her gently, for fear of disappointing her. "You see, I'm quite well off now. To tell you the truth, I'm rather bewildered by it." And he went on to explain how the last mail from South Africa had brought him the details of Walter Delahay's will: how Schoengesicht had been rightly left for life to Hans Prinsloo, and the rest of the South African property, with the exception of Sterkstroom, tied up in an educational trust like the one which his friend Rhodes had made. "But there's a lot of money in England as well," Jim told her, "that is coming to me. And I have the choice of two houses—the farm in the Northern Transvaal called Sterkstroom—my cousin was buried there—and the old place in Shropshire, Trewern, where my people come from."

"How wonderful! And which shall you choose?" Miss Minnet breathlessly enquired. "Oh, I *do* hope you won't choose Africa, Jim," she said.

"I don't know. It depends on so many things."

It depended, of course, on one thing only, though he didn't tell her so.

And that evening, when he returned to the castle, a message from Mrs. Malthus informed him that Mark and Catherine had sailed.

IV. *I Made Another Garden*

THREE weeks . . . In the middle of the second, Cynthia returned to Thorpe Folville with Alec. Alec's wound was not serious. Cynthia brought him by road from London. For the Essendines, petrol, now precious as attar of roses, seemed to be always available. She came straight from her five-hour drive into the green ward, where Jim was playing cut-throat bridge with Harris and Jones, and the men in the other beds, which had been filled up with wounded from the Messines-Wytschaete battle, looked up with a gasp to see her enter.

She stood in the doorway, slim, tall, imperious, one hand still gauntletted, as perfect in her golden radiance as though she had come from her dressing-table; she swept the ward scornfully with her glance of burning azure, aware, yet contemptuous, of the disturbance her beauty had created.

"Jim! Where are you?" she said quickly. "Is Mr. Redlake here?"

The sound of her actual voice stunned him. Harris nudged him nervously: "It's Lady Hinton!"

"Oh, there you are, Jim," she said.

He rose to meet her. "One moment, Harris," he said. She did not hold out her hand to him. They stood, face to face, in silence. It almost seemed that, in spite of those twenty eager eyes, she was waiting for him to kiss her. Marcus Hinton had spoken the truth. As lovely as ever. More lovely, he told himself, as the shafts of her beauty pierced him, with their ancient cunning finding their way to his heart. More lovely, yet different. Of course she was more than five years older than when last he saw her. She had suffered, perhaps. Yet, if that suffering had not softened her heart, it had taken away from her body its girlish softness, defining, with a more exquisite precision, the line which proclaimed her a perfect work of classical art rather than a masterpiece of nature. Her beauty was now as confident and flawless as that of a crystal intaglio. There was not a line in her eyebrows, her mouth, her chin—in all the lovely length of her, that did not seem as secure and inevitable in its perfection as though it had been fixed for ever by a potter's glaze. For half a minute, as they stood and gazed at each other, it seemed as though she, too, were intently examining in Jim the chisel-marks of time and adversity; for both, indeed, had dealt more sternly with him than with her, and the man who now faced her was very different from the boy whose heart she had broken five years before. Apparently her scrutiny pleased her; for when next she spoke she smiled.

"Well, Jim. At last! It's odd that we should meet like this—don't you think so?"

"How's old Alec?" he asked.

"Oh, Alec's all right," she answered impatiently. "His wound is a fraud. I see that your's isn't." Her voice softened momently; then sank to a whisper: "We can't possibly talk here, Jim. Come along to the morning-room and have some tea. I'm dying for it."

Jim turned toward his companions. "We're just in the middle of a rubber."

"Oh, never mind that, Lady Hinton," said Harris generously. "What's threepence a hundred? We'll get someone else to cut in, won't we, Jones?" He swept up the cards.

"How terribly nice of you!" Cynthia answered him so meltingly that he blushed.

Her voice gave poor Harris a rich sensation of gallantry. If she had asked for his life at that moment he could not have refused her. "You see," she explained, "Mr. Redlake and I haven't met for—how long?—five years. Yes, five years almost to a day. You took me to lunch at the Mortimers', didn't you, Jim?" she reminded him with malicious humour. "I believe you've forgotten!"

The sheer effrontery of the creature almost took his breath as she swept him away. Her abounding energy made her go too fast for his game leg over the polished corridor floor. She checked herself and took his arm.

"Poor old Jim," she said, with an unusual tenderness. "I'm sorry."

Yes, she's softer in every way, he thought.

On their way to the morning-room they ran full-tilt into Mrs. Jewell and made her jump.

"I didn't know you were back yet, Cynthia," she said grudgingly, as though it had been Cynthia's duty to report her return. "Did Folville come with you? We must put his papers in order."

"You needn't worry," Cynthia told her. "Alec's on leave. Three weeks. He was boarded yesterday. He's dashing up to Glen Shrieven to try for a spring salmon to-morrow. Of course he won't catch one. Much too late!"

Mrs. Jewell grunted. "And where, may I ask, are *you* going, Mr. Redlake?"

"He's going to have tea with me," Cynthia answered for him, "and probably dinner as well. We've not met for five years."

"That's all very well," Mrs. Jewell replied. "We can't make these distinctions. However—just for once . . ." While preserving her official dignity she knew better than to cross this determined young woman.

"Distinctions, indeed!" Cynthia murmured scornfully as they left her prowling. "I refuse to put up with her nonsense. Of course, to begin with, it's ridiculous to have put you in the green ward to be bored by those dreadful young men. You know perfectly well that you loathe it. I don't know what mother was thinking of. That woman terrifies her with her great red face and her bundles of army-forms. I shall find a nice room for you at once, Jim dear. There are dozens empty. You'd better have the room in Bachelor's Row, where Julian slept when he stayed here," she added gaily.

Jim winced as she uttered that name, remembering the reticence that had held himself and Marcus Hinton tongue-tied. It came from her lips so naturally, casually—almost happily. Had she spoken it, he began to wonder, out of sheer bravado? Was this brazen irreverence part of the armour that she wore, a piece of calculated hardness, a symbol of the spirit with which women of her caste faced their losses? If so, it was a spirit which he could never hope to achieve. It seemed dreadful to him, if, indeed, it were not rather admirable. He could almost see the fine lips of the phantom Julian smiling their approval.

As for Cynthia's suggestion that he should change his quarters—that, of course, would never do. It was part of his code as a soldier to refuse a favour that his comrades could not share. He remembered, as an example, the attitude of Colonel Essex one night on the march down the Pangani. Martock had offered him a stretcher to sleep on, and Essex had turned to ice.

"Have you stretchers enough for the rest of the battalion?" he had asked. The question had cut like a whip-lash.

"Look here, Cynthia," Jim said. "Please don't think about that. I'm perfectly comfortable."

"You're not; and you know that you're not," she answered abruptly. "I shall see about it to-night."

"I'm not going to move."

"Why, Jim, are you going to fight me?" Her blue eyes challenged him.

"I'm going to stay in the green ward."

"Jim, don't be so foolish! Why should you be bored? I suppose you think you're being Spartan, heroic, or something of that kind. It's not very polite of you to prevent my doing things for you. Just for once in a way."

"I don't like that way," he told her.

"All right! Put your long ears back, and dig your feet in! I can't think what's come over you, Jim," she mocked him, "you used not to be so obstinate."

"I'm not obstinate. I just don't want special privileges, because they'd make me feel uncomfortable. The army's like that."

"Oh, *is* it? Dear, dear, what a *preux chevalier!* Don't you think it would be finer to go back and share your tea as well as your bedroom with those awful young men? If you feel that you're violating any scruples, please, please don't consider me."

He laughed. "You know perfectly well I should love to have tea with you."

They passed together into the little room, half study, half drawing-room, overlooking the formal garden. It was, in fact, the only comfortable living-room at Thorpe Castle, and the absorption of all the more spacious apartments into the uses of the hospital had compelled the Essendines to use it exclusively and live in comfort for the first time in their lives.

When Jim and Cynthia entered, both her parents were there, having come down in comfort from London by train in the rear of the car. Lord Essendine had already discarded his Major-General's uniform, but had not yet had time to change his manner, which reacted to the sight of Jim's badges of rank as a general's should. For the present it seemed as if the war had been a godsend to George Essendine. It had come at a moment of confusion in which the old, feudal dignities which he had inherited had almost lost their validity, when the attitude of political "last-ditchers" like himself appeared to be less pathetic than ridiculous. Yet no sooner had war been declared than he regained his self-confidence. In the new order of things the most socially negligible dug-out of a general officer took popular precedence over an ex-viceroy, let alone a peer of the realm; but the soldiers, as luck would have it, were most of them members of the upper-middle class, traditionally conservative in politics and, socially, snobs—the very people, in short, with whom the waning prestige of the nobility still counted for something—with the result that George Essendine immediately found himself an object of flattery and respect in the eyes of the class in whose hands the war had placed power. In his case this catastrophe had been nothing less than a monstrous, a magnificent red-herring whose trail had miraculously transferred him from the category of the hunted into that of the hunter, a sort of hereditary whipper-in of the dogs of war. In the early days of it he had shone as an orator on recruiting platforms. He didn't even have to concoct a new speech. The old one proved, once more, its adaptibility; for he found that by substituting the Kaiser for Lloyd George he could be sure of thunderous plaudits.

The war had helped him in other ways. Ever since the Liberal Budget he had been anxious to cut down expenses by reducing his Thorpe establishment, yet had shrunk from wholesale dismissals, partly out of pride, and partly because the resulting unpopularity would close a political vicious circle. Yet, no sooner had war been declared, than vice became virtue and cowardice heroism. He was able to say to his workmen: "Enlist or get out!" and be sure of the popular spirit applauding his patriotism. Of coure, to a man so dependent on uniform as himself, this was not enough. The fact that he had once held a commission in the Grenadiers, together with his rank, entitled him to the command of a brigade, with the result that, by nineteen-fifteen, he had abandoned his Lord Lieutenant's uniform for that of a Brigadier, bespangled with such a variety of orders that ignorant observers took him, at sight, for the hero of a hundred campaigns, though, in point of fact, the only fire he had ever been under was the enfilade of unskilled but distinguished foreigners at a pheasant-drive.

Although they were perfectly ready to give him a uniform in keeping with his decorations, the War Office had to draw the line somewhere. They drew it, roughly speaking, parallel with the front line and thirty miles behind it. Politely refusing to admit that because an ancestor of his had led the English foot at St. Quentin in 1557 George Essendine was qualified to command a division on the same spot in 1917, the military authorities, who, though snobs, were no fools, had shown their tact by promoting him to the rank of Major-General in charge of Agricultural Operations behind the lines. He became, in other words, G.O.C. Tractors. It was a pretty compliment to his reputation as a model landlord. The crown which he added to crossed swords on his shoulder-strap was almost equivalent, in these days of changed values, to the Garter—now gone beyond hope—for which he had always lusted. And nobody in France, much less at home, had any idea what he was commanding anyway.

At the moment when Jim reached the morning-room Lord Essendine was in flannels, but none the less a general. The charming politeness, almost amounting to deference, with which he had embarrassed Jim as a civilian, would have been out of place with a subaltern. His attitude—not only toward Jim but toward Lady Essendine and Cynthia—was as severely military as that of Sergeant Steel. Whereas, in the old days, he would have considered it beneath his dignity ever to mention by name the exalted personages with whom he was in daily contact, this new Lord Essendine appeared to derive intense satisfaction from doing so. He spoke a great deal of "Winston" and "Hankey" and "K." and "L. G."; and, as Jim listened, he became aware of an aspect of the war which had never occurred to him before.

Up till now he had thought of it as a straightforward struggle to the death between the Central Powers and the Allied Armies. In Lord Essendine's eyes, apparently, this gigantic issue was not nearly so important, and certainly not so interesting, as the minor political intrigues that divided the Coalition Government, and the personal jealousies of the British higher command and their French allies. To him the main issues lay not in the field but behind the lines, and the principal contest was not between England and Germany but between Easterners and Westerners, between Asquith and Lloyd George, between Haig and Nivelle, between Beatty and Jellicoe. These domestic duels, whose prize was not victory but reputation, loomed monstrously out of a cloud of rumour and gossip. Lord Essendine's mind was so full of them that, by the time he had finished, Jim felt that the conception of the war he had acquired since his return to England from the men who were fighting was as unreal as the personal picture he had brought with him from Africa. He found it bewildering and, to tell the truth, discouraging. He was grateful, indeed, when Cynthia, to whom it seemed perfectly natural, allowed him to escape.

"Father's rather a bore when he talks like that, don't you think so?" she said. "I'm so tired of the war as the only topic of conversation. I want to forget it. You can help me to forget it, Jim dear. Let's pretend it's just a bad dream and that we're back as we used to be in the days before it. Let's walk in the garden and talk as if it had never happened. If either of us mentions it we ought to pay some kind of forfeit. That's a lovely idea! Don't you think so?"

Jim smiled; shook his head. "You can't get away from it like that; you can't behave like an ostrich and lose it by hiding your head in the sand."

"An ostrich? Let's talk about ostriches, then. That's exactly the thing. You've been in South Africa. I want to know all about them."

"They're horrible brutes. I loathe them. They've a sort of wily stupidity mixed with obstinacy that I hate, and they can kick like the devil. That's all about them, and the less said, the better," he told her.

"That's a perfect description of a War Office dug-out," she laughed. "There! I've gone and done it at once! What forfeit shall I pay, Jim?" She looked at him with a bright challenge in her eyes. Her glance said kisses.

"I'm too old to play games of that kind, Cynthia," he said.

"Old? That's sheer affectation. You used not to be affected, Jim. You were the most beautifully naïf person I've ever known. You can't be afraid to play with me, Jim. I'm quite harmless, really. Why are you so awkward? It isn't like you."

Her tone of entreaty was almost humble; her eyes were meek, far meeker than he had ever known them. When she spoke and looked as humbly as this she put him in the wrong. It was ignoble of him, who knew her so well, to fail in perception—not to have recognized, beneath the mask of her old gay imperiousness, half ruthless and half familiar, the hidden fact that she had suffered and still suffered bravely. At that moment the lowering of the mask let him see the truth of her feeling, which seemed nothing less than a natural desire to escape from the present and the past's memories into the mood of ancient, untroubled happiness which they, uniquely, had shared.

The momentary lowering of that mask changed her very features as well; their humble entreaty gave them a new and pitiful wistfulness, a tender, April air, more devastating in its appeal (if that were possible) than the old triumphant clarity. He had seen passion in Cynthia's eyes, and scorn, and secure serenity, but never, before this day, a hint of tears. As that sudden mist swept over them her loveliness smote him with a power more devastating than any he had felt before. His reason staggered beneath the blow her beauty dealt him. He had hurt her, the loveliest thing on earth. Whatever it cost him he must make his humble amends.

And indeed, as she watched him she must have become aware of her own triumph. Too wise to presume on her success by pursuing it, she changed her tactics bewilderingly.

"No, of course," she told him, "we're both of us older and more sensible. We can't even fool ourselves by pretending that life is the same. If we explore the past, we can do so quite unemotionally—don't you think so? I've always been terribly fond of you, Jim, and you like me, don't you, a little bit? Well, that's lovely for both of us, just as it is. It's natural that old friends like you and me should want to see all we can of each other. We'll have great fun, won't we? We'll go for long rides together. What about to-morrow?"

He laughed. "My game leg won't allow it. My days of riding are over."

She was humble at once. "I'm so sorry. How cruel of me! I'd quite forgotten about it. You see how little difference a thing like that makes when I think of you, Jim. You ought really to be flattered. We shall have to go out in a car. That'll be even better. You'll be quite in my power." She laughed. "Does that fill you with terror?"

As they spoke they had turned in their slow walk abreast of the maze.

"You remember that, don't you?" she said, with a dreamy smile in which there was no shadow of coquetry. How dare you? he thought, yet, next moment, with astonishing skill, she relieved the situation of its emotional danger: "You know: that day when we caught out poor Mr. Holly and your cousin—what's-her-name? The hedges badly want clipping. It's awful to have no gardeners. Just think of that poor little Love, so deserted, all in the middle of it! It's a shame, don't you think so? I shall have to see that he's treated more properly, although I suppose it's the usual fate of old loves, so he can't complain," she added whimsically. "Did you hear the clock strike? It can't possibly be six already."

Jim looked at his watch. It was six, exactly, he told her.

"Then I must rush into uniform at once. I'm supposed to be on duty, and if I'm not there Mrs. Jewell will want to court-martial me. I must go and see my pet bird. Didn't I tell you? Of course not. My Starling. Such an odd, wild creature, all ruffled feathers, but too fascinating! I've tamed him so nicely now that he'll eat out of my hand. We sit talking for hours on end, Jim, and he writes me verses. Quite pretty ones, really, although they're terribly modern. You'd probably hate them."

"As a matter of fact," Jim told her, "I shall probably like them. I know your Starling. I've known him for years. When he told me about you the other day, he didn't mention the verses. Do be careful to tell him they're 'pretty.' If he swallows that word you've certainly tamed him to some purpose," he added rather bitterly. "I suppose you realise that the wretched fellow's in love with you?"

"In love with me?" She laughed. "How sweet of him! I mean—what nonsense! You speak so feelingly, Jim dear, that I could almost flatter myself into thinking that you were jealous," she said, in her old mocking way. "Oh, *do* try to be jealous! I should feel that such an achievement at our time of life!"

She left him. Of course there was truth in her mockery: he was as jealous as a dog, although he assured himself he was nothing of the sort. This unconfessed state of mind was none the less galling for the fact that his emotional history seemed to be repeating itself. Five years ago she had mocked him in the selfsame way. "Why, surely you're not jealous of Julian! How ridiculous!" she had told him then. He settled the matter now, to his own satisfaction, by assuring himself that he was merely righteously indignant on behalf of poor Starling. Cynthia's exploitation of the odd, wild creature, as she called him, was all of a piece with her, with her greedy, hungry passion to subdue and possess every creature she came into contact with—to mop up the meanest tribute of admiration inspired by her beauty. The woman's vanity was as insatiable as it was cruel. He only hoped that Starling would have the sense to see through it. Yet Starling, poor devil, was already writing verses for her.

His ruffled feelings were not smoothed by the jocular half envious attitude with which Captain Harris and Mr. Jones received him on his return. It struck Jim as only another of the odd, incalculable manifestations of the war-time spirit that these gentlemen, who, in their business life had certainly never brought a blush to the cheeks of a female customer, should feel it their duty, as soon as they exchanged the counter for a sand-bagged parapet, to develop a conversational vein of pawky lubricity. It seemed that the acquisition of an officer's uniform was equivalent, with them, to the change of plumage adopted by certain birds at the mating-season. To them, all varieties of "skirt" were a potential prey. Their comments on Jim's disappearance with Cynthia were pointed in the very worst of taste, and elaborated with a schoolboy facetiousness for which he felt it difficult to make allowances; and his own indignation when Captain Harris, with "thumbs up," suggested that she was a "bit of all right," did nothing but confirm their opinion that he was a sidey toff after all.

His relation with Cynthia herself was becoming no less awkward, for the bitterness into which he had been betrayed when speaking of her conquest of Starling had opened a chink in his armour by which she was quick to profit. It seemed ridiculous that he should resent her "playing off" Starling against himself—for the fact that she did so implied that he was still in love with her—yet resent it he did, with a considerable secret loss to his own sense of security. For the sake of his peace of mind he determined to see as little of her as possible. That was difficult enough in itself, and all the more difficult by reason of the half-humorous, half-injured attitude with which she repaid him.

It was easy to avoid her company with a distance of manner that stopped short of absolute rudeness; but when he was alone with his thoughts her lovely image invaded them. In Cynthia's absence the whole place spoke of her constantly; there was no part of the castle building or grounds that was not waiting, in any unguarded moment, to remind him of the transports of ecstasy that they had witnessed. At night, when darkness cast its owl-haunted spells over the green ward, refashioning, out of the stuff of dreams, the forms that had filled it in the days of his old passion with an actuality beside which the persuasions of his waking reason seemed imponderable, he began to suffer an uncertainty that could hardly be borne.

As an unkind fortune would have it, the business of getting the house at Cold Orton ready for Mark and Catherine so absorbed Mrs. Malthus's scanty leisure that since the day of their sailing cable she had found it impossible to get over to Thorpe to see him at a time when he most needed her reassuring presence. He was left to himself, with Cynthia or—what was even worse—with his memories of Cynthia, for ever obstinately assuring himself that neither she nor her memories meant anything to him, yet guiltily aware of the overwhelming power with which both possessed his mind. At this moment he felt more lonely, more unprotected than ever before, even in the African bush.

It was a curious thing—and a source of high satisfaction to Mrs. Jewell—that, so far, none of his own relatives had come to visit him. Aunt Margaret, providentially perhaps, was still in the Northern Command; and Lucy, as she took pains to explain through the medium of Mrs. Malthus, was far too busy with the infant Holly to dream of leaving Rossington. His grandmother, quite apart from the attitude of malignant vindictiveness from which he had no reason to believe she had departed, never left her cottage window except in pursuit of recalcitrant tenants. In these days, according to Mrs. Jewell's gloating reports and Miss Minnet's tender admissions, she was even more than "queer." It was, therefore, with surprise and bewilderment that he received, one day, the news that a lady visitor had come to see him.

"She wouldn't give her name at first," the V.A.D. reported with a giggle. "Then she told me to say it was Miss Eagles."

"Miss Eagles?" Jim repeated, amazed.

"It must be the Honourable Ermyntrude Eagles, nurse," said Harris sarcastically. "He knows such a lot of high-flyers, does Redlake here, he can't keep count of them all. Some gay dog, I assure you!"

"Well, anyway, Mr. Redlake," the nurse went on impatiently, "she's waiting for you in the entrance hall."

Jim thanked her and went. There, gazing in a sort of awed terror at the threatening forms of the armoured figures like a bright-eyed mouse in a trap, the diminutive form of the marmoset met his astonished eyes. At the sight of a uniformed figure approaching she made a feeble dash in the direction of the closed door; then, seeing that escape was impossible, stood, as though paralysed, awaiting her fate. The marmoset had always been tiny, but was now so shrunken that Jim scarcely recognised her. Bedecked with a bonnet and mantle, too elaborate and too big for her, which he instantly remembered his grandmother having worn ten years earlier at Eton, Eliza Eagles resembled nothing so much as one of those small animals in human clothing whose ludicrous shapes decorate a child's picture-book. When Jim addressed her by name she gave a positive jump, bobbing down at once into her old-fashioned conventional curtsey.

"Oh, Master Jim, Master Jim!" she said. "To think of it's being you! Whoever would have credited it! The way you've grown!"

Jim shook hands to put her at her ease; her mittened fingers were like those of some tiny animal, vole or field-mouse.

"It's the mistress, Master Jim," she burst out hurriedly. "She wants to see you. She says as you'll excuse her coming up here because she never goes out now, not even to Miss Lucy's. She said as I wasn't on no account to give the message to nobody but you—she's that particular and always was, as you know!—but she says, if you'll drop in to-morrow, as the saying is, between four and five for a spot of tea, she'll be waiting for you. So I'd better be moving now, thank you Master Jim," the marmoset went on hurriedly. "She's that particular, as you know, she'll be watching the clock every instant till I get back and me ironing's damped and if it goes dry it'll all be my fault because as you see, I've got me Sunday clothes on. So now I'll be saying good-bye, Master Jim, if you'll be so kind," she added, retreating rapidly to the doorway.

"Can't you wait a moment, Eliza?" Jim asked. "How *is* my grandmother?"

The marmoset shook her head piteously as she wrestled with the door handle.

"You'll see for yourself to-morrow, Master Jim—*Mr.* Jim, that is—you'll see for yourself far better than I can tell you."

She dragged the door open, bobbed another ludicrous curtsey, and scuttled away at an incredible pace, her quick little steps concealed by the skirt that trailed out like a tail behind her.

At one minute to four precisely, next day, in her prim working clothes, Eliza ushered Jim into the front room of his grandmother's cottage. As he stood at the door outside, he had seen through the window, slantwise, Mrs. Weston's profile. Posed utterly immobile against the interior gloom, it had seemed to him less like animate flesh than ever, so dead-white were its sculptured features, so coldly unmoved by his presence on the doorstep, of which the eyes were surely aware. Even when, timidly announced by Eliza, he entered that minute chamber, so familiar by reason of its smell and the shapes of the gilt Empire furniture with which it was crammed, and yet so strange, Mrs. Weston did not deign to turn her head (if indeed she was capable of doing so) in his direction. The only thing in the room that seemed aware of his entrance, or even alive, was a solitary shabby canary, the last survivor of the noisy brood he had known, which suddenly burst into a shrill agitated trilling, hopping about the huge and almost empty cage. A few seconds later the little French clock, whose trivial tinkle preserved, as in a crystal casket, the quintessence of all his early memories of Thorpe, released the mechanism of its silvery, hurried chime. Four o'clock, it announced, with the aged coquetry of a toothless, withered marquise. Precisely on the last stroke of the hour—as though her movements too were controlled by a clockwork setting—Mrs. Weston turned and faced him.

Even in spite of the sideways glimpse which he had caught of her face through the window, its appearance shocked him. Mrs. Weston was not noticeably older. Her face had always been timeless, and whatever suffering her spirit had known with time had left no trace on those smooth, untroubled features. It was rather as if the material of which it was constructed had undergone some physical metamorphosis—as from opaque wax or marble to translucent alabaster. Its singularly perfect form was the same. What it now lacked was substance. All the life which had informed its very malignancy had gone out of its tissues, being concentrated now, with an overpowering vividness, in the two dark eyes from whose pupils the invincible spirit seemed to penetrate his own brain like diamond drills.

One other thing not so much shocked him as filled him with wonder. For the first time in his life he realised that his grandmother was a Delahay. The mask which faced his newly-critical eyes might have been cast directly from that of a sculptured Carolean Delahay on one of the family tombs at which he and his cousin had gazed together in the village church near Trewern. More than that, her features, with certain obvious modifications of sex, astonishingly resembled Walter Delahay's own. The ancient, if undistinguished blood was strong enough to declare itself. In this, at least, he felt nearer to her than ever before.

"Well, Jim," she said at last, "you see I am still alive. You have been here some time. It seems a pity that I have had to send for you."

"I had no idea that I should be welcome," he told her.

"That is not exactly the point," she said drily. "If you had needed money I doubt if I should have had to wait so long for the privilege of seeing you. I have something to say to you. Sit down."

He did so, awkwardly, with his stiff leg outstretched. Her eyes gave it one glance of quick curiosity unmixed with any tinge of sympathy.

"My daughter," she went on—and Jim took it for granted that she referred to Aunt Margaret—"has sent me a newspaper cutting. I see that my cousin Walter Delahay is dead. I didn't even know that you were acquainted with him."

"We met by sheer chance. He has been very kind to me."

"So I gather. That seems to me a mild way of putting it. He has made you his heir, it appears. Most unreasonably. Your mother was only the second of my three children. However, that can't be helped. Walter Delahay was always eccentric. The fact remains that you will be a rich man. He has left you Trewern. I suppose you will go and live there?"

"At the moment I've decided nothing."

"It is your duty to live there. Your respect for the family name should compel you to do so. In addition to Trewern there are other large properties involved. Who is looking after them for you?"

"My cousin's solicitors in London have applied for probate."

"Solicitors in London," she repeated scornfully. "And who may they be? Now listen to me. If you want your new interests to be properly protected there is only one suitable person for you to employ, and that, I need hardly tell you, is your uncle, Mr. Withers. It is your duty to keep the control of this money in the family. Do you understand?"

Jim smiled to himself. As far as his interests were concerned it could hardly be said that Margaret's husband had protected them in the past. Even so, he could not help being impressed by Mrs. Weston's tenacity of purpose and amused by the transparency of her motives. This old woman, whose exiguous remains of life seemed to be concentrated into her two black eyes, was still capable of pursuing her fixed idea, still clutched, concealing her unmitigated dislike of himself, at any expedient which might benefit the object of her savage affection. For the first time in his life he saw this devotion as pathetic—so pathetic that in spite of his determination to see Withers further before he inserted his shady fingers into the Delahay estate, he found it easier to evade Mrs. Weston's demand than to discuss it.

"There's no hurry," he said, "I've barely considered the business side of the matter yet."

"No hurry?" she repeated. "There is always hurry where money is concerned! But that is not all. Of course, as I've said, you'll decide to live at Trewern. You will have enough to put the place on its feet again. If Walter Delahay had consulted me—which, of course, he didn't: we disliked one another cordially—I should have insisted on his making a condition of your inheritance that you should change your name. You can still do that."

Jim shook his head. "I've no intention of doing so."

The dark eyes flashed. "There you show your ignorance. James Redlake signifies nothing. James Delahay. . . . Give me that book."

Jim passed her the volume to which she had pointed, an ancient household account book cross-written in her own slanting, spidery hand.

"In the year fourteen hundred and ninety-two," she began, "after the succession of Henry VII, with whom he was connected through the Tudors of Powys, a certain James Delahay was Lord of the Manor of Trewern. He married a Mortimer—a member of Lady Essendine's family—and through her his descendants have reasonable claims to the Barony of Lacy. They have never established them—for obvious reasons. The Delahays," she added, with unconscious humour, "have never been interested in money. But now that you have the means," she went on triumphantly, "there is no reason whatever why our family should not take its proper place. This is your opportunity, Jim, and you owe it to all the rest of us to take it."

As she spoke, the hard eyes assumed a look of entreaty that was almost humble. The satisfaction that had slipped away from her with the death of Mohun seemed to hover once more within her grasp. Her frail hands trembled, a wave of faint colour welled into her cheeks as she pulled out a folded paper.

"It's all here," she said eagerly. "This genealogical tree was constructed by a great authority, a man who does research work in London. I doubt if he's still alive—his name was Cortachy—but that makes no difference. It cost me a lot of money. All the facts can easily be verified. You had better take it away with you and study it carefully."

As she handed the document to him, Jim had a vision of Mr. Cortachy's tartan tie strangling his tall indiarubber collar, his elevated steel-rimmed spectacles, the wisp of yellowish beard. He heard Mr. Cortachy's Scots voice: "I'm prepared to wager that within a week I could produce irrefrangible evidence of your own descent from the House of Plantagenet!" His grandmother went on speaking:

"Above all," she said, "it is important now that you should make a suitable marriage. I'm thankful to say that marrying money is no longer necessary to you. Advisable as that generally is, you'll have enough of your own. As things are, there are plenty of girls of distinguished families who would jump at you. You must marry well. You're in a position to pick and choose. But don't be in a hurry about it."

Jim assured her that he wasn't.

"I'm glad to hear that," she said. "It can make very little difference to me," she went on, "in any case. As far as I myself am concerned, the future is beyond me; but, before I go, I felt that I ought to impress on you your duty toward the family to which you belong. That is why I sent for you."—She made it quite clear that this was the only reason.—"If you want to have tea, you had better ring for Eliza."

Jim did so; and Mrs. Weston relapsed once more into her translucent, statuesque calm, while the marmoset scurried in timidly with the familiar tea-set. Now that her duty had been performed his grandmother appeared to regard him as no more than an unwelcome stranger, proceeding with her ancient ritual of unlocking the caddy and tea-pouring with the precision of a dispassionate technician and in absolute silence. That she should not be interested in himself or his wound or any of his circumstances that did not immediately concern her ruling passion seemed natural to Jim; he knew enough of her cold, remote nature to realize that her grudge against himself as the son of his parents remained; that she regarded him still as no more than an undesirable instrument for the achievement of her old ambitions. What he found embarrassing at the moment was the silence that held them; so, for want of a better opening, he enquired about Margaret.

At the mention of her name, Mrs. Weston flushed slightly, as though, on his lips, the sound of it were sacrilege.

"Your Aunt Margaret is well . . . and happy," she answered shortly. "Her husband is an exceptional man," she declared, defying him to dispute it. "When the war is over"—she spoke of the war as a passing incident—"they will move into a larger house and take up their proper position in county society. Mr. Withers is extremely prudent in money matters; he has already doubled her capital. With what I shall be able to leave her, they will be more than comfortably off, and the business of your estate will help them as well."

"They have no children yet?"

"They have only been married five years, and their present house is not suitable for a family. Apart from the few things I keep here I have handed over to her all the furniture from The Grange," Mrs.

Weston continued, with the proud satisfaction she had always shown in her personal possessions, "and the rest will revert to her as soon as I join your grandfather. I have given one or two small pieces to Lucy—you, of course, will have no need of anything—but, now that I come to think of it, there is one thing in the house that rightly belongs to Trewern, so you'd better have it—that is," she added with a tinge of her old scorn, "if you wish to take it. Please ring for Eliza."

"Go up to the landing," she commanded, when the marmoset appeared, "and bring down that needlework sampler—the one that always used to hang in Master Jim's bedroom."

"The African sampler?" Jim cried. He thanked her. "There's nothing in the world," he said, "that I'd sooner have. It was the first thing I noticed when my mother brought me to Thorpe, and I've always felt that my life was bound up with it in some way."

"I know nothing of that," Mrs. Weston answered icily. "It was worked by an ancestress of yours at Trewern a hundred years ago. It belongs to the place, so I suppose it had better go back there. Have you dusted the frame?" she asked sharply as the marmoset staggered in with it. "Well then, do so at once. I'm surprised at your carelessness, Eliza. Wrap it up in brown paper. Master Jim will take it away with him."

As Eliza returned with the parcel Mrs. Weston stretched out her cold fingers to Jim; he was more than thankful to escape the intimate physical ordeal of kissing once more that soft, translucent cheek.

"I don't imagine that you will feel the necessity of coming here again," she told him, in a forbidding tone which implied that another visit would not be welcome. "My only desire was to point out your duty to you. So I suppose this will be good-bye as far as we are concerned."

She spoke so emphatically that Jim found it impossible to refute her statement with any conventional protest. As her fingers parted from his she became again an immobile figure of alabaster. The marmoset showed him out in a tremulous flurry which suggested her relief that the encounter had not ended in violence.

He set his steps toward the castle dazed and, for some obscure reason, heartsore. The whole interview had been pitched in a key of such high unreality, embroidered with such queer harmonics and over-tones of bitter-sweet memory. One thing only he knew for truth: that never, in this life, would he see his grandmother again. And, though he had never had cause to love her, this sense of finality and a following silence overshadowed his spirit as he limped down the long village street with the Black Map under his arm.

V. *Miss Minnet Makes Conversation*

THAT anyone apart from himself should have been interested in his spectacular change of fortune was the last thing on earth that Jim would ever have imagined. The personal loss of Walter Delahay concerned him far more deeply than the inheritance he had gained by it. But the death of a millionaire—even a South African millionaire—and the fate of his millions were matters of acute interest, it seemed, to thousands of people who had never heard of him.

When the details of his will were known Walter Delahay's name became prey to the publicity which, in his lifetime, he had so carefully avoided. In a few days everyone at Thorpe, from Lord Essendine to the village shopkeepers, was talking of it, and Jim found himself the subject of that general benevolence which is supposed to be reserved for the happy lover. Lady Essendine, who, of course, knew exactly the right thing to say, congratulated him tactfully. Captain Harris and Mr. Jones, whom Jim's friendship with the Essendines had merely filled with a scornful mistrust of his social pretensions, paid frank homage to the only kind of power they were bound to admit. "Rank and titles are all my eye; but money is money. You can't get beyond that, Jones," Captain Harris sagely affirmed. Even Mrs. Jewell, to whom, as she frequently stated, wealth was physically revolting, regarded him with more kindly eyes and embraced the opportunity of explaining to him at length the duties of Capital to the Established Church; while the pretty V.A.D.—Captain Harris's private property—dropped that hero like a hot potato in his favour. "How pleased your dear father must be!" she confided to Jim.

The only two persons at Thorpe who appeared to be entirely unimpressed were Starling and Cynthia.

"I see you've come into a fortune," said Starling contemptuously. "Well, all I can say is, I'm damned sorry for you. Gold's worse than arsenic. If you once get that poison in your system you'll never get rid of it. No possible hope for you. I suppose you'll be setting up for a country gentleman next. I can see you growing more and more like your father every minute."

Jim laughed. "You're none the worse for the success you've had," he told him.

Starling shook his head dolefully. "Don't make any mistake about that. We were both of us a damned sight better human beings in every way when we were pigging it with the Pooleys in Lupus Street and poor as dirt. And now. . . . Well, God help us! I give it up!"

Cynthia's attitude was more puzzling, yet less embarrassing. The access of fortune to which everyone else, including her mother, had paid tribute respectful or grudging, seemed to strike her as no more than an amusing joke. In the sunny aerial region which she inhabited, as by the divine right of beauty, money simply did not exist. Neither the want nor the thought of it had ever checked her dazzling flight. If its lavish use had been essential to her bright existence, she was as unconscious of it as of the air she breathed; and if, among the people of her world, some were poorer, some richer, these accidental variations were merely relative; that the freedom of anyone living should be limited by the thought of anything so sordid as expense was inconceivable to her; wealth and poverty, to her, were just things that one read about in novels; normal people were, naturally, rich—if one had to use such a word—abnormal people were poor. No doubt it was horrid to be poor; but, equally, it must be horrid to have cancer or tuberculosis or things of that kind. And anyway, a good God, in the best of worlds, had thoughtfully provided the unlucky with hospitals and workhouses and flannel petticoats.

Of Jim's new possessions the thing that interested her most was his "place" in Shropshire. She discussed its adornment with the rapt eagerness that thrilled her when she spoke of new frocks, and with the same technical accuracy.

"I expect you'll find that it's perfectly ghastly," she said. "What fun you will have furnishing it! There must be heaps of amusing things tucked away in odd corners. A Hoppner or a Romney perhaps. There's nothing I should adore so much as helping you with it. Could we drive over and see it one day? *Do* let's, Jim! That would be simply divine, don't you think so?"

He laughed at her typically sketchy ideas of geography. It was much too far, he told her; and Trewern, in any case, was by no means a "show place." Indeed, nothing could be more remote from her elegant fancy than its grey austerities. As he spoke of its lichened eaves, of its garden tangles, of the black bow of curlew-haunted moorland that rose behind it to go rolling away into the lost recesses of Wales, the sudden nostalgia that seized him almost shouted the difference between her kempt world, of the Shires and Grosvenor Square or, in August, Scotland, and the spring-water coolness, the bare asceticism of Trewern.

"It sounds too romantic for words," she cried in response to the sudden eloquence that had carried him away with it. "Just like Scotland—I adore Glen Shrieven when the heather is out. Have you any grouse, Jim? It sounds like a dogging-moor. Fancy having that within two hundred miles of London! Too exciting! I shall never rest till you've shown it me. If you're anxious about the proprieties I can sleep at a hotel."

The Buffalo at Chapel Green, he told her, would give her a shock.

"Well, that's even better," she cried. "I'm dying for shocks. We could stay at Trewern together, and nobody need know. Don't you realize that mother's dear Queen Victoria is just as dead as Queen Anne? You seem to forget that I'm a respectable married woman."

"That hardly improves matters," he told her.

"What a coward you are, Jim! I shall ask my Starling to take me. He's much less conventional. Will you lend us the house for a week-end? Don't you feel that a visit with me to Trewern might inspire him to really great poetry?"

He refused to take her seriously, though that, of course, was the last thing that Cynthia desired. He also refused, he assured himself, to be moved by her threadbare device of playing off Starling against him, though every time that she did so, as she knew well enough, he rose in spite of himself. Indeed, her mood of light mockery was much more easy for him than the rarer moods when her azure eyes grew serious, her manner meek, her voice tender. At such times her beauty retrieved its old secret of wounding him, and the living woman, by some mysterious alchemy of the imagination, became changed into the image that still had the power of haunting his dreams in the likeness of Marcus Hinton's Oread;

at such times her beauty stole through his blood like a Lethean potion, infusing forgetfulness of all the stabilities to which he consciously clung, till Africa and Cold Orton and all the ponderable world became insubstantial and faded away, leaving nothing behind but Cynthia and him, protesting, yet rapt, in spite of himself, by this ancient bewitchment; at such times he could only free himself from the spells that her beauty—of itself, and even, perhaps, unconsciously—wove about him, by a supreme and shattering effort of his dissolving will.

Did she suspect the disintegrating power that her beauty exercised like that of slow water crumbling the rock of his will? Slow forces of nature; will-less, yet irresistible! If she knew, did she care? He was beginning to think that she cared—beginning to be frightened, not so much of Cynthia as of himself.

In this ferment of uncertainty—stoutly though he denied that anything was uncertain, least of all his devotion to Catherine—the yeast of his interview with his grandmother began to work. In addition to the genealogical tree which he had carried away with him and whose details his inner knowledge of Mr. Cortachy's cynicism urged him to distrust, she had sent him, a day or two later, the manuscript volume into which she had carefully garnered so much of the Delahay family history. Jim had always disliked and despised Mrs. Weston's snobbishness as the most ludicrous, if the most potent, of her personal traits. Her insistence on the Delahay family pretensions to the disadvantage of poor Dr. Weston's had made him regard the whole subject with even greater distaste. Yet here, if her authorities were correct—and the references were open to verification—was a mass of material on which his romantic imagination could not but fasten with pride. He had always told himself that he liked the Essendines for what they were themselves, and never, for one moment, as his grandmother did, because they happened to be Folvilles. Indeed, he had pushed his dislike of the old lady's devotion to Debrett to a degree of fierceness which amounted to an inversion of snobbishness on his part.

The possession of Trewern, together with Mrs. Weston's subtle suggestions, awakened an interest in the name and deeds of his ancestors which, unworthy though it might be, was one of the most natural and potent of human infirmities.

The very antiquity of that name, the persistence with which, however faintly, it was stamped through century after century on the blood-stained scroll that is the history of the Radnor March, those lands where the dynastic destinies of England had been decided, filled his mind with a romantic awe not unmixed with satisfaction. He embraced the idea the more passionately because his share in that history had been inherited not from George Redlake but from his mother, the person whom George Redlake had most scorned. The Delahays had been established at Trewern, he remembered, five hundred years before Mrs. Parrot's Philadelphia was dreamed of. That they had remained undistinguished through all those centuries was easily explained; their lands were too small and too barren; compared with their Marcher neighbours they had always been poor; like a stunted, storm-buffeted oak, the family had clung to the stony slopes of Trewern, always starved of the wealth that might have widened the spread of its branches. Now, at last, the adventurous spirit of Walter Delahay had brought to the name the wealth it had always lacked, gold enough and to spare running out of the quartzite reefs of the Rand and the blue-ground of Kimberley. He, Jim Redlake, through no virtue of his own, possessed at that moment the power which fortune had denied to his forbear James Delahay five hundred years earlier. Was it his privilege—nay, more, his duty—to nurse that old name, so long barren of prowess, into a late and startling efflorescence; to put Trewern, as his grandmother had said, on its feet again?

The dream, even though it should be no more than a dream—was splendidly inviting. While the sound common sense which his African experience had given him dictated a modesty that stopped short of such fantasies as the revival of the extremely shadowy Barony of Lacy, he realised that the rest of Mrs. Weston's programme was not extravagant. The name Redlake, though his own, signified nothing but a connection of which he had once been proud, which he now resented. He was thankful to know that his mother no longer bore it. Why not cut the connection for ever and change the unmeaning label? Why not raise Trewern to the state that belonged to it, rebuild the house, rehabilitate the waste lands? Why not found a family that would carry the old name forward to its proper dignities?

The more he thought of it, lying there with the manuscript book on his knees and his leg propped up (the wound was quite healed) beneath the crusader's cedars, the more the idea entranced him. After all, it was neither fantastic nor ignoble. The Delahays' lances had swept the March a whole century before that old Folville brought back his scallops from Acre, his cedar-seeds from the Lebanon.

To found a family . . . "*You must marry*," his grandmother had insisted. Of course he would marry. He would marry Catherine, and the sooner the better. (How languidly the screw churned through the South Atlantic—through the thin-sailed fleets of nautilus and scudding flying-fish!) He would marry Catherine whom he loved, and their children would grow up in the sweet, cool air of Trewern. The boys would go to Winchester, of course—no stiff legs for them, no more wars after this one—and the girls would be just like Catherine, tall, sweet, healthy, with eyes like love-in-a-mist. "*You must make a suitable marriage*," the old lady's wisdom dictated. Was Catherine suitable? Suitability be damned: he loved her. She was sound and straight and utterly, beautifully English. The fact that he could ask such a question revealed his own unworthiness of her. He grew hot with self-scorn as he plumbed the depth of his baseness. And there, like a fragrant ghost, was Cynthia standing at his elbow. He looked up and smiled.

"Another pair of gloves gone west!" she said. "You might at least have pretended that you were asleep. What's this that you're reading?"

Her voice was quiet as the sounds of the summer day. Of late she had quite abandoned her teasing references to Starling. She yearned for a quiet life, she said, and the violence of his poems bored as well as embarrassed her. Now, as she sat down beside Jim on the lawn, she seemed full of a tender submissiveness that hardly belonged to her, the submissiveness he had only known in that week of rapture at Thorpe five years before. She spoke languidly, with a grass-stem between her lips:

"Jim, don't be so secretive!"

It was nothing, he told her. A collection of manuscript notes on his family history. It wouldn't interest her.

"But anything about you interests me, Jim," she reproached him, "and family history's the most fascinating thing of all, don't you think so? Now please be good and tell me about it."

He turned to the page that dealt with the first James Delahay.

"You see," he told her, "an ancestor of mine once married a Mortimer."

"A Mortimer? Mother's family? But Jim, how exciting! That means that we're cousins. Why didn't you tell me before? Why, that explains everything! Mother will be terribly interested."

"It happened so long ago," he told her, "that you're quite at liberty to forget it."

"I shall do nothing of the sort. Did she live at that place . . . Trewern?" But before he could answer her question her old restlessness seized her. "Let's go for a walk," she said. "I'll promise not to tire you. It seems so like old times to be walking here with you, Jim. How terribly young we were, and how terribly foolish! Rather sweet and pathetic, too, when you come to think of it." She slipped her arm into his as they walked together. "No, this way," she said. "Let's go into the kitchen garden. None of the patients ever go there, and I want to look at the peaches. Do you remember the fruit I gave you from the forbidden tree?"

She was ruthless. That afternoon there was nothing that she would allow him to forget. Hot June had shaken out all the foliage of summer five times since last they walked there; yet the chestnut spires, the plumes of lilac were rusted as of old, the elms began to droop with the same heavy leaf; the same cuckoo—who knows?—let fall its faltering notes on apple-orchards flushed with flamingo hues. Not only the perfume of this resurgent bloom but the perfume of Cynthia's self enveloped him, that flowery essence that was so much her own. Against these assaults he slammed and bolted the doors of his senses and locked himself into silence. But this obstinacy, which, in other days, would have provoked her scathing mockery and revealed her at her most imperious, her most outrageous, made her tenderer and more solemn than ever, a picture of innocent, injured childishness.

"What's the matter with you, Jim?" she said. "What do you want me to do?"

"I'm too old for this sort of game, Cynthia."

"Too old? My dear child!"

"Let's go back to the house."

"Very well."

It would have been so much easier, he thought, if she had refused. This submissiveness stole the wind from his sails. As they crossed the lawns, now barred with long cedar shadows, the figure of Cecilia Malthus came hurrying toward them. She was hot with cycling as usual, her face crimson with sun. Her coltish ungainliness and her ill-made cotton overall made a contrast with Cynthia's cool elegance that nobody could miss. When she saw who Jim's companion was she stopped in confusion, flushed and intimidated.

"Who can this be?" Cynthia asked. Her eyes swept Cecilia scornfully from head to foot.

"It's Cecilia Malthus from Cold Orton. You know her, don't you?"

"I suppose I just do know them, vaguely. She looks as if she wanted to speak to you."

Jim saluted and smiled. "Oh, Jim dear," Cecilia cried, "I've been looking for you everywhere. We've had a wire from Madeira. Their boat's up to time after all. Southampton at dawn on Tuesday! Isn't it *marvellous*?" She glowed with excitement. "I simply had to come over and tell you; but now I must fly like the wind."

"Can't you stay for a moment?"

"No, really I can't. There's a choir-practice."

She was obviously anxious to escape from Cynthia's eyes. Ridiculous, Jim thought; she's no right to patronize Cecilia like that.

"You remember Lady Cynthia Hinton, don't you, Cecilia?" he said. Even now the new name came unnaturally to his tongue.

"Yes, of course," Cecilia blushed. "How d'you do?" She held out her hot hand to Cynthia, then bolted precipitately.

"How hot the poor thing is! You'd think that she'd come from Madeira herself!" Cynthia smiled condescendingly "Cycling's rather barbarous in summer, Jim dear, don't you think so? And what's this mysterious message? *Who's* wired from Madeira?"

"Her brother and sister. They're sailing home from South Africa."

"I see. Which sister? The eldest? That tall, gawky girl?"

Jim flushed. "You've not seen Catherine for years. She's not gawky in the least."

"Oh, no doubt she's quite lovely. But what has it to do with you?"

"I'm engaged to her."

"Engaged!"

He laughed. "Yes, I'm going to marry her."

"To marry . . . Catherine Malthus?" She paused. "Jim, why didn't you tell me before?"

"We haven't told anyone. As a matter of fact you're the first person to know in Thorpe Folville."

"But why all this secrecy? Isn't that rather ridiculous?"

"Of course. I entirely agree with you. But there it is. However, it's no longer a secret. Won't you congratulate me?"

"Congratulate you? I want you to be happy, Jim dear, if that's what you mean."

"I am happy, Cynthia."

For answer she gave him nothing but a questioning smile.

"Well, that's over, thank God!" he thought as he left her, returning to the green ward. It had been easy enough, in the end, though, after all, why should it ever have been difficult?

"*You* look pleased with yourself," Captain Harris told him. "Come into another fortune?"

Jim smiled. He was pleased with himself—with the world, with everyone in it. The relief was incredible: like that of a man who has made a hair's-breadth escape. He sat staring in front of himself and smiling for no particular reason. Then his mind got to work, detaching itself from the indefinite, rosy glow. The steamer had left Madeira, presumably, yesterday. Intermediate boats took longer. From Madeira to Southampton, five days. Yes, that made it Tuesday. "Whatever happens," he told himself, "I am going to meet her."

More easily said than done! Under urgent circumstances a patient in hospital might be granted forty-eight hours' leave. He might try for that. But Lady Essendine, as luck would have it, was again in London, and Thorpe Castle, at the moment, in Mrs. Jewell's hands. Such a request, to her, would leave him bound, hand and foot, in the red tape which she handled with such malignant delight. In her eyes his meeting with Catherine would certainly not be regarded as a "private affair of urgency." One other expedient remained. He clutched at it gladly.

He found Mrs. Jewell grimly engrossed in a sea of Army Forms, in search of the clerical errors on Lady Essendine's part which afforded her, at the moment, her principal joy in life. As he entered she looked up irritably.

"Well, Mr. Redlake?"

Whatever his request might be, she was obviously anticipating the delight of refusing it.

"My wound is healed, Mrs. Jewell," he said. "I'm quite fit for Home Service. I want to ask for a board."

If he had wanted anything else it would have been easier for her. To withhold her approval from this was against her principles. However, she still could qualify it.

"You appear to imagine," she said, "that such things are informal, that we keep a medical board on the premises. The board will come over from Leicester on Saturday morning. On that day, if you wish it, you can be examined in the ordinary way."

"Well, you'll put my name down at any rate, won't you?" he asked.

"Most certainly I'll put your name down."

"There's just one other thing I wanted to ask you."

Mrs. Jewell stiffened her shoulders, prepared to refuse it.

"I shall be awfully grateful if you won't mention this to anyone."

"I am not in the habit of chattering, Mr. Redlake," Mrs. Jewell declared.

Five days . . . !

Late that evening, Cynthia paid him a visit. He was able to meet her now, he felt, with more confidence; yet, as she entered the ward, her beauty took his breath. She had evidently recovered from the bewilderment into which his confession had thrown her. In all his life he had never seen her more composed, more calm, or more natural. Her utter absence of strain or awkwardness imposed its influence on the whole ward. When Harris and Jones jumped up to attention, she begged them to sit, with the kindest, the most ravishing smile.

"I've a wonderful plan for to-morrow, Jim," she told him softly. "The glass is still going up, so it's sure to be fine. Do you realise that ever since you came here we've never once been to Burrow Hill? You always loved it, didn't you? Well, to-morrow we'll take one of the cars and drive out there together, and take our tea with us. Don't you think that's a lovely idea?"

"To-morrow . . ." Jim hesitated. "I promised to have tea with Miss Minnet."

"Miss Minnet?" She puckered her brows. "Who on earth is *she*?"

"You know perfectly well whom I mean, Cynthia. She lives at Rose Cottage."

"Oh, that odd little woman? Of course. You can put her off. If you'll write her a note I'll have it sent down this evening."

Jim shook his head. "I can't possibly disappoint her. She's a great friend of mine."

"Well, so am I, aren't I?" she said. "You can say that I asked you first."

"You didn't. So I can't. I'm sorry."

"Oh, Jim, how scrupulous you are! How can you expect to live in civilised society if you behave like that?"

"If you'll come back to tea with me to Rose Cottage we might go to Burrow Hill just the same."

"I don't know her."

"That makes no difference. She'll be glad to see you."

"Do you really think so?" she asked with mock humility. "Well, if you're determined to be obstinate and noble, I suppose you must have your way. Shall we say half-past two?"

On Burrow Hill the gorse was a running flame. The thymy turf, rabbit-cropped, gave to their feet like velvet. Hot wafts of thyme and almond-scented gorse rose to meet them as they plodded up the ramp of the earth-work. If ever there was a ghostly place it was surely this, possessed not only by the phantoms of crumbling warriors, of those ant-like hosts who had reared the deserted *vallum*, but by ghosts whose tenure of the light had not been so sapped by time. As they cleared the crest and flung themselves down on the sward, the green valleys of Wreak and Soar stretched away beneath them, infusing that melancholy which is part of the beauty of wide spaces. Around them dry gorse-pods snapped; above, the sky sizzled with heat in a ringing silence. But for all their solitude it seemed to Jim that they were not alone. He could have taken his oath, that day, that Julian was with them. In the wide lost lands below, a church bell droned its summons to a village funeral; the far sound reached them like the bourdon of a cruising bumble-bee. Cynthia turned and smiled. "That's Ashby Folville," she said. "Tell me, what are you thinking of, Jim?"

He could not bring himself to tell her that he was thinking of Julian. Out of his confusion of thought he selected another strand to please her.

"I was thinking of a line of poetry," he said. "*And see the coloured counties*. It sounds just right."

"Tell me the rest of the verse."

He recited in a hushed voice:

"Here of a Sunday morning
My love and I would lie,
And see the coloured counties,
And hear the larks so high
About us in the sky."

"I've heard that before," she said. "It's a song, isn't it? Who wrote it?"

"Housman."

"Of course. It's quite lovely. He writes plays as well, doesn't he?"

"No, that's his brother."

"I love to hear you reciting poetry. Go on with it, Jim."

"No, not that one," he told her. "There's another that's even more appropriate:

Into my heart an air that kills
From yon far country blows:
What are those blue remembered hills,
What spires, what farms are those?"

His voice sank lower:

"That is the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went,
And cannot come again."

"Yes, that's beautiful too," she said, "but it isn't true."

"What do you mean, Cynthia?"

"The last line: *And cannot come again*. It's not true. You can."

"I don't understand."

"You're not trying to understand, Jim." Her own voice was soft and low. "You remember, when last we were here Julian was with us?"

"I shall never forget it; but I don't want to talk about it. When I told you I was thinking of that verse I was thinking of him. I loved Julian, Cynthia."

"I know you loved Julian. That's the strange thing. I didn't, you know. I never loved him a bit."

"Cynthia! You married him."

"I know. But I didn't love him. He knew that as well as I did. It was merely a convenience. We were expected to marry. Why shouldn't I tell you the truth, Jim?"

"I can't believe it."

"You must believe it," she cried. "I've only been once in love in the whole of my life. With you . . ."

"My dear! We took leave of our senses, both of us."

"If you prefer to put it like that . . ." She smiled as she gazed at him. "I'm afraid, in my case," she said, "I've never recovered them. You're the only person in the world I shall ever care for, Jim."

He shook his head silently; averted his eyes. He dared not look at her.

"Don't turn away from me like that." Their eyes met once more. "Well, do you believe me now?" she asked triumphantly. He could not disbelieve her. "I'm not in the habit of making these declarations, you know," she told him.

"My dear, that's all over. It's too late."

"No, it isn't too late. Don't pretend that I'm nothing to you, Jim. I shall never be nothing to you. I'm not such a fool as not to know what a man is feeling. All these weeks. . . . And you know it. I refuse to let you deny it. There's something almost dreadful about one's first love, don't you think so?" she pleaded.

"I can't listen to you, Cynthia. You know what I told you yesterday."

"The man of honour!" He winced. "No, no, I didn't mean to say that. I take it back, Jim. I'm sorry. Please forgive me?"

"Of course."

"There's just one thing wrong, Jim. I can see you think of me as being what I was five years ago when I used you so badly. I admit I behaved abominably. I couldn't help it. I didn't know which way to turn. But I'm not like that now. I'm older and very much wiser, and I know my own mind. Jim . . . it *isn't* too late! If you want me the least little bit. . . . Well, here I am! I'll marry you to-morrow if you like. If you don't want to marry me—well, in that case you needn't, that's all. I'm not modest, you see. Why should I be modest? I love you."

He was silent.

"At least you can think it over," she said.

"I can't think it over. It's impossible. The whole thing staggers me. Even if I were free . . ."

"Free? Free? You're as free as the wind!" she told him scornfully. "Do you think that there's any power on earth that can bind men and women when they're in love?" Her voice softened again. "Well, well," she sighed at last. "At any rate you can kiss me. That needn't trouble your conscience. We're old friends and . . . cousins, aren't we?"

She leaned toward him and touched his lips with her own.

"Oh, Jim," she said, "I've been waiting for this for weeks. Are you quite made of stone?" And she kissed him again, more boldly, with a warm and lingering slowness.

He was made of anything but stone. At that moment he only wished to God that he had been. For five years his dreams had been troubled by Cynthia's lips. Now their softness, as they first touched, and the warmth that stole through them to his, breathed, like a soft draught, on the smoulder of his old desire till his head went dizzy, his skin tingled, and his brain seemed to ring with sudden wild cries of alarm. "Fire! Fire!" they shouted. All his body was on fire. Will and reason stood dumb and helpless gaping at the torrent of flame. Then a new voice, his own, spoke suddenly, harshly:

"It's time to be going. I oughtn't to disappoint her. I said four o'clock."

"Very well," she answered, "we'll go. No, no, let me help you!" For the slope made it hard for him to rise to his feet.

He thanked her conventionally; but his voice was still shaken and trembled, and the sound of it must have told her how much he was moved; for now, as they faced one another, her lovely face glowed in anticipation of triumph, the azure of her eyes was proud and tender and triumphant at once. "You are mine," they challenged him. "By that kiss you are mine. Do not dare to deny it! You can keep your soul, but your body is always mine. I am your mistress, your slave, whichever you will; but nothing can alter the fact that you always belong to me!"

"You'd better take my arm, Jim," she said gently. "It's awkward going down hill."

She took his, and the warmth of her breathing presence was with him as they passed down the slope through the hot wafts of thyme and gorse-bloom. She spoke no more; and Jim dared not trust himself to speak, for the turbulent flame still roared and flickered within him unmastered. In awful alternations of ice and fire, of desire and shame, he walked down the hill beside her, unconscious of the path they trod, unconscious of her actual presence, his mind like a sea that goes on heaving when the wind which has lashed it has fallen. Unaware of how it had happened, he found himself sitting in the car at her side; the wind, roaring past them, blew back the hair from her brows; her parted lips smiled with the joy of speed and victory.

They pulled up at Rose Cottage. Miss Minnet was waiting for him; he could see her through the lace curtain. Cynthia entered beside him, meekly, with a radiant smile that was like a kiss, in the dark little passage. Miss Minnet came fluttering forward from her seat in the window.

"I've brought Lady Cynthia to see you," he said, though he hardly knew what he was saying.

Miss Minnet's face blossomed with joy and surprise. "Lady Cynthia? A great honour, I'm sure! I know your aunt, Lady Ernestine. She has constantly been most kind to me. Won't you take a seat, Lady, Lady . . ." Her voice trailed away pathetically. She was wondering at the last moment whether she oughtn't really to have spoken in the third person, and this grave doubt filled her with confusion; but how thankful she was, after all, that she had given orders for the maid to bring in the Sheffield tray and the Crown Derby tea-set!

"Cream and sugar, my lady?" (That must surely be right.)

"Cream only, thank you," said Cynthia, "and very little of it."

"She said 'thank you'," Miss Minnet thought, "what gracious manners!"

As her hands, still trembling with excitement, clutched at the plate of bread and butter, she became aware of Jim's silence and glanced at him anxiously He had scarcely spoken a word since he entered the room. What *could* be the matter? The poor boy looked ghastly. He must be ill. Or had he and Lady Cynthia been quarrelling? She looked perfectly happy. And how lovely! Just like her pictures. But sure enough, there was something that had happened between them. To dispel the silence, which by now was becoming intolerable, Miss Minnet burst out into a twitter like that of a whitethroat in a gallant attempt to save her tea-party from wreck.

"What *can* be wrong with him?" she thought, as she went on twittering, remembering thankfully that, in case of emergency, there was still half a cough-mixture bottle of brandy in the medicine cupboard upstairs. "It's so difficult," she thought, "to find suitable conversation for people of a different condition from yourself; and, even though I know it's an honour and mustn't forget it, it would have been so much easier for me if Jim had come alone. However," she thought, "after all we are what we are and it's no earthly use pretending we are anything else, and simple faith is as good as Norman blood."

"You spend a great deal of time in London, don't you, my lady?" she went on courageously. "Thorpe Folville must be quite a change from the roar and the bustle. I was only in London myself on two occasions. I shall never forget them. I went up the first time with a party of pupils from my old school in Leicester. We started at six in the morning if I recollect rightly. No, I'm wrong. It was six fifteen. The journey was most fatiguing. But we were amply rewarded. We visited the Tower and the Monument, and the House of Lords, with which, of course, you're far more familiar than I am."

Miss Minnet smiled. That, at least, was a tactful allusion to her visitor's station. She coughed. I do hope, she thought, that my voice won't give out.

"Won't you have some more tea, Jim?" she said. "A rock-cake, surely? I had them made specially. Now what was I saying? Dear me! Ah, London, of course. Well, my second visit was more of a social nature. I went up to see a friend of mine, a school-mistress, a colleague of my professional days, who had retired and was acting as companion to a Lady of Title." Miss Minnet paused impressively.

"Now *what* was her name? I remember! It was Lady Higgins. You're probably acquainted with her. No? Oh, I'm sure you must be. She was, if I remember, most highly connected. Yes, I'm almost certain her brother-in-law was Lord Mayor of London. And she *lived*—" Miss Minnet brought out the words triumphantly—"in a house of her own in the fashionable quarter of Pimlico!"

"How delightful! Don't you think, Jim," Cynthia said slowly, "that perhaps we ought to be going?"

Miss Minnet's face fell. In spite of everything she had failed. Jim came to her rescue:

"There's really no hurry, Cynthia."

How sweet he was, the dear boy! Miss Minnet beamed on him. Once more into the breach!

"I've just heard," she said, "a piece of exciting news from the Cold Orton carrier. He passes my door every evening, you know," she confided to Cynthia. "He tells me that Mark and Catherine Malthus are arriving from Africa on Tuesday. How thrilled Mr. Malthus must be! Such a God-fearing man. It will be nice for you, too, Jim. You were always great friends with them, weren't you?"

She looked at him eagerly to keep up the conversation. At that moment, it seemed to her, he came to himself again. His old bright self! It was as though the words had transformed him, had stabbed him awake from the dream-like abstraction under which he had laboured. He smiled as he answered her:

"Yes, Cecilia cycled over and brought the news yesterday. But we're rather more than friends. I've been waiting to tell you. Catherine and I are engaged. We hope to be married next month."

"Oh, *Jim*!" Miss Minnet was transported. "How happy you have made me! There's no one in the world I would sooner you married than Catherine. Such a splendid girl, and so good, so truly beautiful!" She glowed as she turned to Cynthia. "Oh, isn't Jim fortunate? She plays the organ beautifully. You know Catherine Malthus of course?"

"Yes. I think I've met her. I don't know her really," Cynthia smiled.

Why, whatever was the matter? Miss Minnet gasped, as her thoughts flew back to the medicine-bottle of brandy. The girl was as white as ivory. She was clutching the arms of her chair. She was going to faint. But how beautiful! she thought, as she made a futile little dart toward her. "Are you ill?" The words formed themselves; but before they were spoken the blood had flowed back again into Cynthia's cheeks. Still smiling she rose. Probably nothing but the sun, or anæmia, Miss Minnet thought. Cynthia held out her hand:

"I must really be going now, Miss Minnet," she said. "But *you* needn't come with me, Jim dear—unless, of course, you're feeling too tired to walk. Shall I send down the car for you?"

"Of course not. I think I'll stay, though, if you don't mind."

"I hope Jim will bring you to see me again," said Miss Minnet humbly.

"I'm afraid it won't be for some time." Cynthia smiled as she spoke. "I'm driving up to join my mother in London this evening. *So* kind of you to let me come to your sweet little house! They're so much nicer than big ones really, don't you think so? No, *please* don't trouble to show me out, Miss Minnet." She waved her hand gallantly from the doorway. "Good-bye, Mr. Redlake," she said in her old, mocking tone. "I shan't see you again, I suppose."

Miss Minnet stood raptly listening to the roar of the starting engine. "A sweet girl," she murmured ecstatically, shaking her head and smiling. "So modest, so natural, so completely unaffected! What a pity her husband was killed! Oh, Jim! I'm so happy about you and Catherine."

Next morning the visiting board, with some hesitation, passed Jim fit for Permanent Home Service and gave him his three weeks' leave. Mrs. Jewell, in her office, made out his railway voucher.

"Southampton?" she said, with surprise. "Why on earth do you want to go to Southampton? The east coast is far more bracing."

Jim left her to guess.

VI. *Four Dawns*

THE labouring planet rolled eastward to meet the dawn. In June the banks of Rufiji are drenched at night with icy dews, and the sun, which later becomes a torment, is a gift of heaven. So Langford thought, as he spread his soaked shirt to its rays, and settled down, with a pipe of native tobacco, to wait for the tea which a black Kavirondo was brewing for him and Engelbrecht.

"Do you know," he was saying, in his slow Somerset voice, "last night when that blasted lion stampeded our carriers, I was thinking quite a lot about the trek down the Pangani and the old Kalaharis. A damned good lot of fellows. I've never known better. I was thinking of that chap Redlake. A well-plucked youngster. I wonder if he lost his leg."

"If he didn't, he's probably killed in France by now," said Engelbrecht. "The chap who got shot through the head when he carried him in—what *was* his name?—Furnival, was a pretty stout fellow, too. Boy! *Chakula tayari?* Where the devil's the breakfast? That fellow needs a *kiboko.*"

"They're all getting stale," said Langford. "This damned war's gone on too long . . ."

* * * * *

At La Bassée, in France, the sky was still grey; but the streets of the village behind the lines, where Alec Folville's battalion was resting, echoed all night through to the rumble of heavy wheels so that nobody could sleep. As soon as one train had rumbled through, another followed. Alec Folville lighted a stub of candle and read his mother's last letter.

You'll be surprised to hear, he read, *that Jim Redlake is married to one of those Malthus girls at Cold Orton, I'm not quite sure which. I expect it's the eldest, because she was the only pretty one. Mrs. Jewell is quite jealous; the Malthuses were so poor, and Jim, since all that money came to him, is something of a parti. I'm rather worried at the moment about dear Cynthia. She seems so restless just* *now. She talks about going to France, which seems quite ridiculous. In a way, I'd be glad if she'd marry again . . .*

Why should mother want her to marry? Alec Folville thought. Women think about nothing but marriage. The one thing that matters just now is to get on with the war. . . .

* * * * *

At that moment, Miss Minnet, at Rose Cottage, reached out her hand in the dark for a sip of water, for her mouth was rather dry. The church clock struck four. "Four o'clock," she thought. "Darling Jim!" She turned over to sleep.

* * * * *

At Trewern dawn comes later still, but, before the dawn, the curlews thrill the sky with their high, wild music, awakening the swallows that twitter under the eaves with the noise of a creaking basket. The swallows have come all the way from South Africa, Jim thought, as their twittering awakened him. The swallows have built here since first Trewern was built. They will go on building and raising their broods as long as Trewern still stands. He lay very still as he thought of these and many other things, for fear of waking Catherine. She stirred in her sleep.

"You're awake, Jim," she murmured lazily. "What are you thinking about?"

"That I love you."

She laughed quietly, happily. "I know all about that. But what else?"

"I was thinking that now, at last, I shall write a book."

"About the war? I'm so tired of the war, Jim."

"Lord, no. I can't say. About swallows, if you like, and—I don't know—life in general: how astoundingly rich it is, in spite of everything."

Esthwaite Lodge.
1929-1930.

THE END

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Young, Francis Brett, 1884-
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The Redlakes